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A HOUSE DIVIDED

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"Sit down and let us talk it over."

A HOUSE DIVIDED

BY

E. M. JAMESON

AUTHOR OF "THE PENDLETONS"

WITH SIX ILLUSTRATIONS BY H. M. BROCK

LONDON
HODDER AND STOUGHTON
27 PATERNOSTER ROW

1905

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TO
MY BROTHER
WHOSE HELP AND SYMPATHY
HAVE BEEN UNFAILING
I DEDICATE THIS BOOK



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CHAPTER I

RODEN'S RETURN

RODEN felt like a boy again as the cab sped past all the familiar landmarks. After two years' absence abroad, England seemed inexpressibly dear despite the fact that London, dusty and deserted, with blinds drawn, was in its least attractive phase.

"They'll be out of town for a certainty," he said to himself as the cab turned out of the main thoroughfare into a silent side street; "but it will be something to know where they are, and whether Hester"—

Dismissing the cab at the corner house, he rang the bell.

Mrs. Feilding was out of town, John said, with a glance of recognition at the visitor, in spite of an absence of two years. Roden paused on the steps. It was none the less disappointing because expected. Mr. Feilding was also out of town—in fact, the house was to be shut up to-morrow for a month or two.

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"Letters are to be forwarded," suggested John, who considered the visitor's disappointment more than adequate to the occasion. Roden paused an instant longer, half turned back to ask a question, then thought better of it. He must possess himself in patience yet a little longer.

He nodded, took out a card, then replaced it.

"I will write," he said, and had turned to go finally, when an interruption came from the background.

"I am at home, John," said a voice, with dignity, and John stood aside to allow the daughter of the house to take his place.

Roden looked at her, and she looked at Roden with a pair of clear brown searching eyes. He undoubtedly had the best of it; his face was in shadow, while hers was fully disclosed. John had retired to a respectable distance in the hall, disapproving of such a breach of social etiquette, but knowing his place and his young mistress better than to utter a word of expostulation. Indeed, John did not approve of the order he had received to give no address to visitors; it contained an unnecessary air of mystery derogatory to the family, and he was, on the whole, glad rather than otherwise that responsibility should be removed from his shoulders.

"You're Mr. Roden, aren't you?" asked Clemen-

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tina, putting out her hand half doubtfully in greeting.

"Why, positively, it must be little Clem," exclaimed Roden, shaking it; "*how* you've grown."

"Well, I ought, oughtn't I?" remarked Miss Feilding, in a tone of mild expostulation. "It's ages since you used to come here. *Years*, I should suppose."

"Two," said Roden.

"Seems longer," said Clementina, tossing back her mane of fair hair; "lessons make the time go so slowly. I daresay *you've* been enjoying yourself?"

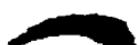
"Tolerably," replied Roden, smiling a little at her manner; "abroad all the time."

"Ah—!" exclaimed Clementina, clasping her hands and looking past him down the street, empty save for a white cat on the opposite step, and the milkman clashing his cans as he went on his afternoon rounds.

"You'd like to come in, wouldn't you?" she asked, bringing her gaze back to Roden's face.

"Very much," he replied.

"There's nobody in *really* except me," said Clementina, leading the way into the hall. "Of course, John often says there isn't when there is. Not that he means to be untruthful; he has to say it. Mother and father are staying with the Briddales, and Miss Lowndes—my governess—has gone to meet her brother home from India this after-





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"No, don't you pay; tell him to go down to the kitchen door."

But Roden gravely gave the order, and produced from his pocket the necessary coin.

Clementina executed a dance of triumph on the top step and, putting her arm within his, led the way indoors.

"It's *such* an opportunity," she said, as they went towards the morning-room. "Mother never lets me eat muffins; she says they're simply ruinous for the complexion, and that when I grow up I shall regret it all my life. As if one bothered about one's complexion at twelve."

"At that rate I ought not to have whistled for the muffin-man," said Roden, seating himself in a holland-enshrouded chair.

"But *you* like muffins?" queried Clementina anxiously. "I got half of them for you, of course. You do like them?"

"Simply delight in them," said Roden gravely. "That's the worst of being abroad; not a muffin have I tasted for two whole years. There's no place like England, after all."

Clementina's face cleared. She crossed the room and rang the bell.

"John, tea," she said. "Mr. Roden and I will have it in here. There are muffins, John."

"Are there, indeed, miss?" said John, in mild

astonishment. "And you would wish cook to do some for tea?"

"All of them," corrected Clementina; "we got six pennyworth. And, John, Mr. Roden likes them well buttered."

"Very good, miss," said John, backing out into the hall, where it is to be supposed he indulged in a smile.

So well pleased and serene was Clementina's countenance—and she had an expression little short of angelic—that Roden did not attempt to smile. He glanced out of the window to where a solitary plane tree shed its leaves, while his hostess settled herself with folded hands to entertain him.

"I hope you don't mind the holland covers?" she said; "they're dreadfully depressing."

"They might be if you had to live with them always," said Roden, a question still hovering on his lips; "but what does it matter for an hour or two?"

Clementina nodded.

"The drawing-room is much worse, because the chandeliers are hanging in bags from the ceiling."

"And when do you go away?" asked Roden.

"To-morrow, at eleven o'clock," said Clementina. "Miss Lowndes and I are going into the country. Wasn't it lucky you came to-day? You'd have missed me and the muffins."

"One hardly realises one's good fortune," said Roden; "I too am going into the country to-morrow—to Netherlands."

"I don't know where that is," remarked his hostess; "is it where you live ordinarily?"

"I haven't been there for ten years," replied Roden, putting his hand behind his head and looking retrospectively at the plane tree. "It's a dear old place, Clem, with dark rooms, and a lot of ugly old family portraits, and the quaintest old garden you ever saw, with a fountain and a sundial, and the hedges and shrubs cut into swans and animals and things."

"*How* nice," exclaimed Clementina; "at least the garden. I don't much care for dark rooms, and there's enough ugly pictures here. But the garden—are there apple trees?"

"Lots of them. Perhaps you'll see it some day, Clem; your mother might bring you to stay for a few days."

"She never takes me anywhere to stay with her," said Clementina, giving a decisive nod; "so that's no good. Perhaps—you wouldn't care for Miss Lowndes? Now, if only Hester"—

Roden's eyes came alertly back to the present. "Hester"—he began, when at that moment John came into the room with the tea-tray. He placed it upon the table near Clementina, and then retreated

for the muffins, which required a table to themselves. They came in a dish about the size necessary for a large joint, and above them was a silver cover in equal proportions.

"Cook thought it useless to put them in the muffineer, miss, as you said you would like them all."

Clementina surveyed the dish and then glanced doubtfully at her visitor, who was gazing from the window with some intentness.

"They do look a lot," she said; "and cook might have sent some up in the muffineer. That will do."

She began to pour out the tea thoughtfully, placed a cup on the little table near Roden, and then moved towards the muffins.

Roden sprang to his feet and raised the cover.

"Let's help ourselves," he said.

"What a lot they give for sixpence," said Clementina, as a group of seven lavishly buttered muffins lay before their gaze. "I *never* thought there'd be more than three."

And all the time Roden was longing to ask a question. Clementina did full justice to the muffins, and thought him out of appetite for only consuming one.

"I had lunch very late at the club," he said. "They are really delicious, but don't ask me to

eat any more. Think of the dreadful effect upon my complexion."

"*You* needn't mind that," said Clementina, looking quite distressed at his want of appetite. "Have another cup of tea, anyhow. Was the last sweet enough?"

"Quite," replied Roden, and paused with uplifted spoon. "Do you know, Clem, last time I was here Hester poured out tea, and would not give me more than two lumps." He stirred his tea slowly. "Is Hester living with you now?"

The question was out at last. Clementina looked up from her second muffin.

"Oh no," she said, in surprise; "she hasn't lived with us for a long time—since just after you went away."

"Of course she must have finished with lessons long ago," said Roden; "she nearly had when last I saw her. She is living with her own people, I suppose?"

Clementina knitted her brows; she had finished her muffin, and she now returned to her chair opposite to him.

"I don't know," she remarked.

"Don't know?" echoed Roden.

Clementina shook her head perplexedly.

"There's something the matter, I believe," she said; "it was all so *queer*."

"Something the matter?" Roden was so taken aback as to be incapable of more than echoing her words for a second time.

He had called on Mrs. Feilding for the sole purpose of ascertaining Hester's whereabouts.

"Well, it's this way," said Clementina, something in the visitor's expression causing her to realise the importance of the occasion. "I don't know the meaning exactly, and I *did* miss Hester so much. I'm getting used to it now. One does get used to people going away?"

"Sometimes," assented Roden. "Tell me about it."

"I was in the drawing-room one day—no, it was this room," resumed Clementina—"when mother and Hester came in. They didn't see me, because I was in the window-seat over there, a little bit hidden by the curtain, reading—I *think*, Hans Andersen"— She paused as if to make quite sure, while her listener tried to possess his soul in patience. "Well, anyhow, Hester told mother that she must get ready that minute to go somewhere. She was standing just where you are, and mother got very angry, and said that if she went she must never come back again, but that if she stayed she must stay altogether, and never go near the other people, whoever they were."

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She paused for breath, and Roden turned his head. The lines of his mouth had hardened.

"Never come back again?" he asked. "Why?"

"I can't think," said Clementina; "but anyhow, mother said, 'Choose between us, Hester.' And then Hester seemed to get angry, and said, 'How can you expect me to leave her all alone, ill?'—and—and all that—I forgot the exact words," said Clementina vaguely; "and then she went out of the room, and mother sat in a chair and cried, and kept on saying, 'The disgrace, the disgrace of it all.'"

"And Hester went?"

"Yes, she went away, but she kissed me in the hall first, and I asked her when she would be coming back. She had two trunks, and Jakes, of course, and John called a cab, and she said, 'Never, *never*,' just like that. She wasn't crying, but her face looked quite different—white, you know; and then I cried, and she went away. She didn't look out once, though I waved my hand."

"And you have never seen her since?"

"Never."

"And she has never written?"

"I don't think so. Mother told me not to speak of Hester again; but, of course, one can't help thinking. What do you suppose it was?"

"I have no idea," said Roden, staring out of the window as he mentally reviewed the scene. He

knew Mrs. Feilding to be essentially of the world worldly, but he knew also that she had been both fond and proud of her niece.

"Then you do not think that your mother could give me Hester's address, even if I wrote?" he asked.

"I'm quite sure she couldn't," said Clementina. "Because one morning at breakfast father was wondering what had become of them—the Percivals, you know—and he said, 'The house is not like the same without Hester; I wish we knew more about the child.' And mother said, 'You absolutely amaze me, Richard!'"

At another time Roden might have smiled. He had so often heard Mrs. Feilding's accents raised in the same tone to her husband, who was the merest cipher in his own house.

He looked at his watch.

"I must go now, Clem," he said; "I've enjoyed my visit so much."

"I have too," said Clementina, wondering why her visitor seemed different from a moment or two earlier. "You'll come again some time?"

"Perhaps," said Roden. "Good-bye, Clem. Pleasant days in the country; you'll have to live without muffins, I fear."

"I shouldn't get them, anyhow," said Clementina. "It was only to-day, when everybody was out. Good-bye, good-bye."

CHAPTER II

RODEN TELLS AINSLEY A SECRET

RODEN walked down the street in a brown study. His alertness had for the time being deserted him, and life seemed to have suddenly grown flat, stale, and unprofitable. In all his wanderings of the past two years it was to Hester his thoughts had turned. He was a man of no home ties and few friendships ; consequently, his affections, though sparsely distributed, were extraordinarily tenacious, self-contained rather than given to demonstration, but unchanging to the few.

When he had left England, two years before, Hester was living with her aunt and uncle—the Feildings — where she had the best masters for music and languages. Roden had seen much of her, and though at the time a mere schoolgirl, free from care and enjoying life to the full, he had realised that she was the one woman in the world for him. His uncertain prospects and her youth had made him keep his own counsel, and he had voluntarily gone away for two

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years, determining on his return to try to win her.

Now that he was the owner of a considerable property, he had hastened back, to find that the unexpected had happened, and that some turn of fortune had overtaken her. That it was misfortune he realised from Clementina's remarks; but whether it concerned Hester alone, or her people apart from her, he would have given much at the moment to discover. There was no one to whom he could apply for tidings but the Feildings, and he groaned in spirit to think of the delay that must ensue before finding some trace of her. Roden was a man who knew his own mind, and he there and then made a resolution to leave no stone unturned to find Hester. Hailing a cab, he drove back to his club and found a telegram waiting for him: "In town. Come and dine. Ainsley." Roden's spirits grew lighter. Ainsley was his one familiar friend. Between them was the strongest tie of friendship, a sympathy that never lessened, a cordiality that never waned though months and even years might lie between their meetings, that silent bond, in fact, which is so possible between men, and so rare between women, who seldom take one another for granted unquestioningly, as is the habit of men. Roden had not supposed for a moment that Ainsley

would be in town. For years he had gone to Scotland for the shooting, and though Roden had sent a note announcing his return to England, he had not expected to see Ainsley.

Seven o'clock found him once again in a cab driving towards Ainsley's chambers off the Strand. They were pleasant rooms at the end of the street, and the windows of the sitting-room overlooked the river. Ainsley was a lawyer of some private means and a practice which had been infinitesimal when he and Roden had last met.

"My dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you," he said, starting up as Roden entered.

And they glanced at one another critically, without emotion, and then talked of the weather prospects. After dinner they retreated to the balcony, where there was just enough space for a couple of chairs facing one another, with a tiny table between. There they sat and smoked for a time silently, while the sunset flamed across the banks of Thames, and gilded the sails of the barges as they glided slowly along to their destination.

"I know nothing more leisurely than a Thames barge," said Roden; "after the hurry-scurry of other modes of progression it strikes a note of dignity that is indescribably soothing. One might easily dream one's life away and lead a lotus-eater's existence in a Thames barge."

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Ainsley blew a contemplative trail of smoke into the air. Big Ben boomed out eight solemn strokes, and half a dozen clocks followed suit, like terriers answering the deep bay of a hound.

"A Thames bargee is essentially a person of action," Ainsley said, "and I am convinced that the lotus-eater would be totally incapable of the flow of language arrived at by the bargee when other craft interrupt the even tenor of his way. Like many things in this life beautiful to behold, the Thames barge is more soul-satisfying at a distance."

Roden leaned his elbows on the edge of the little balcony. Mists were rising over the river and blotting out the opposite banks. A dull glow still illumined the horizon, a sullen red intermingled with dark rolling clouds that almost seemed to touch the river's brink. Lights began to glimmer softly here and there, to be reflected in the stream below. The night grew still and solemn; only the light jingle of the cab bells broke the silence, with now and then a dull roar from the traffic in the streets, where humanity, good, bad, and indifferent, went its way.

Ainsley broke the silence.

"A good thing you happened to be in town to-day, Roden. I am off to-morrow to join Fletcher in the wilds of Ross."

Roden knocked the ash from his cigar.

"The second time that remark has been made to me within a few hours," he said. "It seems to me we are all here to-day and gone to-morrow. I go down to Netherlands."

Ainsley nodded.

"I saw his death in the *Times*," he remarked briefly.

"I wish you could have come down to the old place with me," Roden said, watching the gloom gather over the river bank; "and yet, perhaps it is just as well that I should go alone and grow accustomed to things. There is always a mingled feeling in revisiting old scenes, and the pleasure in returning to Netherlands is dashed by much resentment."

Ainsley sat in silence, fully comprehending the meaning of the words.

"He sent for me just before his death," resumed Roden, "and we were together for three days. I suppose the ultra-dutiful would be shocked to learn that his death caused me little emotion. God knows I had small cause to love him or to feel for him a shred of respect and duty. I did all I could for him at the last, and he enjoyed having me there, I suppose, in his own incomprehensible way.

His last words were a gibe at me and the world in general. Parents reap as they have sown. Yet

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do you know, Ainsley, I'd give a good deal to regard his memory in the way a son should."

"I know you would," said Ainsley. "Just take my advice: don't let what has happened poison your pleasure in Netherlands. You need not reproach yourself; you did what you could. You had much to put up with, but let bygones be bygones."

Roden's face had hardened; he took things more deeply than Ainsley's more genial nature was capable of, and he did not owe one day's happiness to his father.

"Yes, Netherlands is mine to have and to hold," he said slowly; "and—it must run in the blood—it's the dearest spot on earth, in spite of an unloved childhood spent there. In fact, as a child I disliked Netherlands rather than otherwise, and breathed more freely when outside its gates; yet it draws me indescribably."

"It's the spirit of your fathers," said Ainsley; "I've noticed such a thing in other men, and those the least sentimental. You'll be terribly lonely, all the same, unless"—

Roden looked up inquiringly.

"Unless you marry."

"I shall only do that," said Roden, "if"— Then he paused and lighted a fresh cigar.

"I called on the Feildings to-day," he remarked

a moment later, with apparent irrelevance. "You know them slightly?"

"Feilding? Let me see." Ainsley frowned in thought. "He was rather a meek little chap with a society wife, wasn't he? Always seemed afraid to call his soul his own. I remember going there once or twice, but I did not keep up the acquaintanceship after you left England. There was one child, wasn't there?—an imp with long black legs and the expression of a cherub. And—yes, by the way—there was another girl, a niece or cousin or something of Mrs. Feilding—an uncommonly pretty girl too, named—Now what was her name?"

"I saw little Clementina to-day," said Roden.

"That was the imp! But the other?" He paused; Roden's face was perfectly impassive. Then a sudden impulse seized him. Everything contributed to confidences; the misty shadows of the river, the silence that yet seemed quivering with life.

He sat upright and faced Ainsley, leaning one elbow on the table.

"The other was Hester Percival," he said distinctly, "and I mean to marry her one day, if she will have me. There never could be anybody else, there has never been anybody else to whom I have given a second thought. To the outsider she may have seemed a mere child looking upon life as one

RODEN TELLS AINSLEY A SECRET 21

long day of laughter and enjoyment, but she has an amazing amount of character, Ainsley, and I always thought it a pity that she should have been left to such a worldly-wise upbringing as that of Mrs. Feilding."

Ainsley held out his hand, and Roden's met it in a strong clasp. There was silence for a moment. Then Ainsley broke it to put a question.

"Why did she live with the Feildings?" he asked.
"Were her own people badly off?"

"On the contrary, they were very rich; better off than the Feildings, I imagine. They were rarely for two months in the same place, I believe; travelling, visiting, and so on. It was a fad of Mr. Percival's that Hester should not go to school, though the elder daughter had spent most of her time at boarding school, and was abroad—in Paris, I think—finishing her education; in fact, the sisters had hardly met since childhood. Hester he thought delicate, and would have liked at home, but Mrs. Percival would not have it, and, though she conceded the point in Hester's case to some extent, the latter ended by living in the long-run almost entirely with the Feildings, and she hardly knew her own sister. Hester used to talk to me a great deal about her sister—I forget her name—and I always thought it such a pity that they should be apart. Mrs. Percival must have been a curious type of woman, from what

I gathered. Hester always talked of her with the greatest admiration, but Mrs. Percival evidently lavished most of her affection upon the elder sister."

"And have you seen the Feildings since your return?"

"They are out of town. I saw little Clem, who tells me that Hester no longer lives with them, that they do not even know her address or that of her people."

"Impossible," exclaimed Ainsley. "It must be a joke of Clementina's. She is quite capable."

Roden shook his head.

"It is nothing of the kind. Clem is too fond of Hester. There seems to be some mystery, some disgrace." Roden paused. "Whatever it may be, Hester is evidently suffering from its reflection, and she has had to choose between the Feildings and her own people."

"Most extraordinary," said Ainsley, when he had heard the whole of Clementina's story. "There must have been something serious, and evidently the Feildings have lost sight of them."

"I have been out of touch with English newspapers for a long time," said Roden. "Percival was a fairly well-known man, I imagine; I only met him once at the Feildings', a florid, genial-looking man whom Hester monopolised all the evening. She seemed to care more for him than for her

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mother. I saw the latter once, too—a very handsome woman, beautifully dressed, and looking as if she thought the world made for her. Of course, I wrote to Hester, and sent her numbers of pictorial postcards when near enough to civilisation to get them. And she never replied; there was not one line from her among the letters forwarded to me. She always prided herself on keeping her promises, too. I might have known that something was wrong from that fact alone."

Ainsley was buried in thought.

"Percival, Percival," he said under his breath; "now where have I heard the name, and in what connection?"

Roden waited, but Ainsley failed to solve the problem, and it was still unsolved when they parted at midnight.

Left alone, Ainsley went into his room, and began his long-deferred packing for the morrow. It was only when fixing the straps of his gun-case that a sudden thought transfixed him where he knelt.

"I've got it," he said, half aloud, "that affair of—Yes, Percival it was, of course."

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

THE little wayside station was quite deserted when Roden alighted from the train. He was the sole arrival, and his appearance seemed a matter of astonishment to the porter.

"Where might you be for, sir?" he asked. "There's no cabs, unless specially ordered to meet the train."

"I prefer to walk—send the luggage to Netherlands," said Roden briefly, looking about him as one who knew the place and yet saw it under strange conditions. There had been no station at Netherlands when he had left it, as he thought for the last time, ten years before. In the cutting where the dark line of rails ran he had often gathered blackberries as a boy, and where the station-master's tiny house now stood had grown a gnarled old oak tree in whose branches he had swayed many and many a time, hidden from passers-by and thinking those thoughts of youth which are so long by reason of their very vagueness. There had been more room for them there, among the oak

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leaves, than nearer home, where a want of sympathy had made the atmosphere cold and chilling.

The dusk of early autumn was falling over the distant woods and meadows as he went on his way; in the west lay a broad bar of crimson to mark the track of the setting sun.

Roden leaned over a gate and watched the band glow and deepen and spread, until it seemed like gorgeous crimson banners streaming across the sky's grey background.

"Just the same," he said, half aloud. "How familiar it seems to come back to such a sunset. There are no sunsets in the world more beautiful than those at Netherlands."

He drew a long breath, and some of the sternness left his face as he breathed the air of home. The rigid lines of his mouth relaxed, his dark eyes took a softer expression, for, after all, home is home, and for the moment, after many wanderings, a restfulness such as he had never felt since boyhood lapped him round. There are moments in a lifetime which stand out clearly from amid months and years of existence, moments when time seems to stand stationary and allow of breathing space. Such a moment had come to Roden now, and he stood motionless, his glance fixed on his own woods and upon the crimson sunset, as though he waited for he knew not what. A wind arose and rustled

the dry twigs among the hedgerows, whirling a few belated leaves around his feet. But he never stirred.

Then to break the charmed silence came the bark of a dog from the lane below. Roden started and stood upright. There were footsteps coming along, and the dog barked again. Roden raised his head and listened. To those who know and love dogs their bark is as distinctive as the voice of friends, and he thought he recognised the speech of a dog he knew well.

"Impossible, of course," he said, and his expression lost its alertness. But the charmed moment had taken to itself wings, and he removed his arms from the bars of the gate preparatory to departure. The glory of the sunset had faded into a dull greyish purple, and the dusk lay heavily upon near surroundings as well as upon more distant objects. A bird flew out of a tree, startling Roden; the dog barked again and raced, a white speck upon the path, towards him.

"Quiet, Jakes," said a voice. Roden felt no doubt this time. He turned round, unable to believe his senses, then went forward so that he and the speaker met face to face. There was a moment's silence. Roden's voice failed him, he could only look down at the face beside him in a wonderment and pleasure that surprised him by its completeness.

Hester's voice broke the silence. Across her sensi-

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tive face a reflection of the sunset crimson glowed for a moment, then faded, leaving her very pale. Woman-like, however, she regained her composure first.

"How strange it seems to meet here," she said, "in the depths of a country road. I thought Jakes and I were the only people who ever came here. Down, Jakes."

For the terrier, less hampered by the conventionalities, was jumping up at Roden half beside himself with delight at the unexpected meeting. Roden stooped and patted the dog.

"Jakes remembers me," he said; "I thought it was his bark. You know how we used to say that it expressed the joy of living more than that of any other dog we knew."

"I remember," said Hester gravely. "Jakes was two years younger then, but his bark is the same; the joy of living is still strong within him."

Roden smiled at the sententious little speech, so unlike the Hester he remembered.

"And we are two years older too, Jakes," he said, pulling the terrier's ears. "I wonder if the joy of living is as strong in us as it used to be. I wonder if your mistress can still appreciate ice-cream and chocolates. Do you remember, Hester?"

Hester looked away across the hedgerows. The dusk was merging into dark, and perhaps it was the dimness of the light which made her face look pale.

I remember," she said. "I still have the last box. It was covered with La France roses—but you have probably forgotten—and wide pink satin ribbon."

"I have not forgotten," said Roden; "and you said the chocolates were far too beautiful to eat. But we ate them in the long-run, didn't we?"

He spoke in a rallying tone. Something in the girl's expression and voice puzzled him. It was the same Hester, yet tone and manner were indescribably changed. The Hester he remembered of two years ago had been, like Jakes, full of the joy of living, not yet emancipated from school, but standing with eager rather than reluctant feet on the borderland between girlhood and womanhood.

Hester drew a long breath.

"It seems such ages ago instead of only two years. Do you know that was the very last box of chocolates I had given to me? Life seems so different, too serious for chocolates and pink satin streamers."

"Nineteen should be able to appreciate chocolate as thoroughly as ever seventeen did." Roden was still puzzled. "Why, two years is a mere nothing out of a lifetime."

"Out of some, perhaps," said Hester. "Do you know I sometimes wonder if many girls find such a gulf stretching between seventeen and nineteen. It seems a century ago."

Her voice quivered, but she forced a smile,

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then stooped to pat Jakes, who had, after many excursions hedgewards, subsided at her feet. There was a little air of dignity and appeal in Hester's manner which forbade questionings. Roden's heart ached for her. The air grew misty and chill, and involuntarily both moved onwards.

"I can't tell you how surprised I am still at meeting you here," said Hester, recovering herself; "it seems so very far from everywhere and everyone."

"But it is the most natural thing in the world for me to be here," replied Roden. Then he hesitated for an instant. "My father died a few months ago at Mentone."

"I'm sorry," began Hester tentatively. But Roden shrugged his shoulders.

"He died to all practical purpose ten years ago to me," he said. "It is a fact that I never knew him. As a boy I dreaded coming home for the holidays. He was an old man then, and—he broke my mother's heart. I realised it in some vague way, who knows how? The whisperings of nurses, perhaps, when my baby brain could not understand. Comprehension came later. I never knew my mother; she died when she was nineteen—your age, Hester."

His voice broke off suddenly, and he thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his coat. "That is not a feeling likely to foster good-fellowship between father and son."

"No," said Hester.

"You have only to look at her portrait to realise the gentleness of her soul in addition to the beauty of her face. I'll show her to you some day."

"I should like to see your mother's portrait," said Hester. "I have sometimes wondered"—She broke off and looked up at Roden, who smiled involuntarily; with the smile some of the bitterness drifted away. They were pacing along slowly side by side. The white road stretched away in front of them as if in limitless distance; all other surroundings were wrapped in gloom.

"I do not in the least resemble her, if that is what you mean," said Roden, after a pause, "neither in looks nor in nature, unfortunately. She was very fair, a little thing, with large eyes, and a look about her that makes one's heart ache in an indescribable way."

He looked down at his companion.

"Now that I come to think of it, you are not unlike her," he said. "I used to wonder of whom you reminded me, in those chocolate days of long ago, Hester, and now the resemblance is stronger."

Hester's sensitive face flushed, but the light was dim and he could not see her features distinctly.

"Do you know," continued Roden, with the apologetic ring in his voice under which men so often suppress a deeper feeling, "I am quite

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anxious to get back to Netherlands to see my mother's portrait. It will be a poor welcome home, but I have not seen her for ten years."

Hester had stopped suddenly in the roadway.

"*Netherlands?*" she said. "Did you say Netherlands?"

"Where else?" he asked, half impatient at her want of comprehension. "Netherlands is home after all. The old place is mine, and one does not realise how one loves a place and how one has longed for it until it is one's very own. The air here seems clearer and purer, and the sunset more lovely, because Netherlands is set in the midst."

He broke off suddenly, noticing for the first time his companion's silence.

"It is too bad of me to bother you with my affairs," he said; "but, do you know, Hester, since last I saw you I have hardly talked them over to a soul. I'm not given to confidences, and I missed you indescribably when I went away. You never answered any of my letters, and you know you promised to write."

"It is the only promise I ever broke in my life," said Hester, in a low tone; "but I had to. It was the only thing to do when everything was so different."

Roden suddenly put out his hand, and held hers closely in his own.

"Tell me," he said. "There's something troubling

you, and I, selfish brute, have been too busy with my own affairs to notice. Tell me, Hester; you know you used to confide your worries too."

Hester gave a little laugh that ended in a sob. Roden could feel her fingers trembling in his clasp.

"That was different," she said. "The worst was due to sums that wouldn't come right, or scales that had to be practised too often on a summer day. They were tragedies in their way, but soon cured with chocolates."

She drew a long breath and was silent. Though she would not for worlds have put her hand to her eyes, Roden knew in every fibre that she was crying. He told himself that as a child she used to cry in a silent way that went to his heart, but then a few words or a box of chocolates sufficed. He realised at the moment acutely that different measures were needed for older griefs, and that his was not yet the right to administer them. The night was very still. Jakes walked along quietly beside them, subdued into quietude by the darkness. In his doggy mind he realised that his mistress was in trouble, and he touched her skirt with his nose now and again in sympathy that was none the less desirable because silently expressed. To Roden, walking beside her with her hand still in his, she seemed little more than the child he had known a

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few years ago. She was so small, he thought, looking down at her as she walked along, so young to have the burdens of life thrust upon her shoulders at nineteen. She had been such a merry child, full of the joy of living, not so long ago, and it cut him to the heart to realise the change in her.

"Tell me," he said again, with gentle insistence; "you know it shall go no further."

"Oh, if I *could*!" exclaimed Hester passionately; "oh, if I *only* could!"

"Are you quite sure?" asked Roden, for the last time. "You know a trouble shared isn't half so hard to bear."

Hester drew a long breath. "I can't," she said; "I must not."

A sudden thought flashed across Roden's mind, and with it came a whirl of feeling that for a moment overwhelmed him. He stopped short in the road. "Hester," he said, "don't think me very"—He broke off confusedly. "May I ask you one question? Is it—now don't be angry—has he—is he—I mean, has anyone treated you badly—broken off an engagement, or something of the sort?"

"*Engagement?*" asked Hester, in bewilderment. "Broken off, did you say? Oh!"

Even in the dim light he might have seen, had he possessed the courage to look, the crimson flood her face from brow to chin.

"I had no business to ask," Roden said, in quick remorse, looking so shamefaced that Hester felt sorry for him.

"No, you really had no business to ask *that*," she said, taking her hand away; "but—I've never been engaged, and haven't really thought about it. Oh no, that is not the trouble. Something far, *far* worse. Something I can never tell to you or to anybody. Please don't ask me—promise."

"I promise," said Roden, so relieved as to be ready to adventure half of his kingdom; "but if I ever can help you, you will send for me?"

Hester turned suddenly and held out both her hands with something of her childish frankness and *camaraderie*.

"The very first shall be you," she said; "and it would be heavenly to be able to do it. But I never shall—never."

She took her hands from his and stopped at that moment beside a wooden gate placed in a high wall, which he had not noticed.

"Is this where you are staying?" he asked.

"I live here," said Hester.

"*Here*," he exclaimed delightedly; "then we shall be near neighbours. Look, across the road is one of the boundaries of Netherlands. Why, you can come and see it. I've any number of things to show you. And you can see the portrait as soon as

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ever you like. This used to be old Stracey's place. Are they still here?"

Hester shook her head. "The cottage had been to let for quite a long time when we took it, it seemed so far from everywhere," she said.

"Who are 'we'?" asked Roden, almost impatiently. "You make me seem inquisitive. Who are 'we'?"

"My mother and I," replied Hester. "We live here with an old servant. Drusilla has been in the family for thirty years."

"And Jakes lives here too, I suppose," said Roden, to hide a deeper feeling. The Hester he had known was the daughter of a wealthy man, accustomed to every luxury that money could buy.

"Well, we shall often meet," he said, as Hester held out her hand in farewell. But she shook her head.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but it is not possible. My mother is an invalid, and we see nobody, and go nowhere. That is why, glad as I felt to meet you, I was more sorry than I could say to hear that Netherlands is yours. Of course, I ought to have remembered. You do believe me?"

"I believe you, but I do not agree with what you say," he replied, his mouth taking its most stubborn lines. "There can be nothing great enough to come between old friends like ourselves."

But Hester, with a little shake of the head, inserted a key in the wooden door and disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER IV

RODEN TAKES POSSESSION OF HIS KINGDOM

THE master of Netherlands was seated at dinner for the first time under his own roof-tree. After being a wanderer on the face of the earth for two years, the sensation was not an unpleasant one. The lamps were lighted, the heavy curtains were drawn across the windows, which by day opened on to a terrace overlooking the woods and distant meadows, with a pleasant stretch of garden in between, a garden which had been the joy of several mistresses of Netherlands in years gone by.

Roden leaned back in his chair meditatively as Berrydale came and went. He sat in the high-backed carved chair which his father and grandfather had occupied in their time before him. At the far end of the table was a similar chair, placed as if for the mistress of the house. Roden surveyed it with an expression half sad, half introspective. Thoughts of the girlish mother who had occupied it for so short a time came to him, followed by thoughts of what might be in the future. But he

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was essentially a modest man with regard to himself, and, while he never hesitated for a moment as to his own feelings, he felt extremely doubtful about Hester's. Roden was a man of strong but repressed affections, which would sweep forth resistlessly one day and render him capable of giving and doing great things for love.

His pleasure at finding Hester so unexpectedly was largely tinged with concern for her, but that she would hold to her word with regard to not seeing him he never for a moment supposed. In such a circumscribed area they must meet. Though he puzzled throughout the meal on Hester's changed fortunes, he looked upon his meeting with her as a happy omen for the future, and it is not to be wondered at that, on this his first evening at home, he should build castles in the air, and that Hester's face, with its aureole of brown hair, should look at him across the table.

Berrydale came and went in his quiet, well-conducted manner, and after a time Roden found himself watching him.

Berrydale, in his turn, was studying his master between the stages of waiting. A decade had made less difference in servant than in master, who from a boyish lad of twenty had developed into a man, looking every day of his thirty years. Bronzed, and possessing the indescribable air of

good breeding which travel and association with the world had given him, an absence of beard or moustache showed Roden's determined and well-cut mouth and chin without disguise. It was a strong face, strong and inflexible, yet showing that capacity for tenderness of which only the very strong man is capable. The eyes, keen and observant, looked frankly out on the world, and possessed a certain quick judgment of their own with regard to men and circumstances. Berrydale decided that it was a face to be trusted. The old order had changed, and he and his wife had pondered long and anxiously, knowing that in matters of service youth counts for more, in these latter days, than years of faithfulness. Only that morning Berrydale had owned to feeling less young than he had been. Roden caught the glance, and perhaps realised the anxiety. He struck a match and lighted a cigar as Berrydale prepared to leave the room.

"You find me a good deal altered, eh, Berrydale?" he asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Well, sir, ten years *is* ten years, and makes a difference to most of us."

"Not a bit of it," said Roden, smiling. "To me, perhaps. I was only a lad when last we met, but you hardly look a day older."

"Thank you, sir." Berrydale could not have suggested a compliment more suited to the occasion.

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"I feel quite brisk still, Mr. Anthony. I beg your pardon, sir—and I hope—that is"—

He took up the small salver nervously, his voice dying away as he moved towards the door. Roden motioned him nearer.

"Stay a moment, Berrydale. As a child I received little notice and fewer kindnesses than most. Perhaps that is why those shown to me by you and your wife stand out so distinctly."

He flicked the ash from his cigar and glanced across to the mantelpiece, where hung the portrait of a man in hunting costume, a man with thin lips, grey hair, and cold eyes. Berrydale followed the glance. His old employer had been just, but, on the whole, a hard taskmaster to his dependants. Then he looked back again to meet the eyes of the younger generation. Roden leaned forward, elbow on table.

"I can recall one of those occasions even now," he said. "Perhaps you have forgotten, Berrydale? It was the birthday of a small boy, his eighth birthday, a date which passed, with one exception, unnoticed. That exception was a volume of *Robinson Crusoe*, brightly illustrated, over which the small boy stumbled as he crossed the threshold of his bedroom that morning. I can see him now hugging the precious find on his knees under the tablecloth all through breakfast, his brain in a whirl of excite-

ment. It was an epoch in the life of the small boy, Berrydale, and you and your wife hardly realised the joy and pleasure and romance that volume brought into his solitary life."

Berrydale's staid old face broke into a smile.

"Well, I declare, if I hadn't forgotten all about it, Mr. Anthony. To think of your remembering that little book all these years—twenty-two years and more. Dear, dear, and it only cost about half a crown at most."

"It is the little things that count," said Roden; "and one does not forget. I hope to see you at Netherlands for many a year, Berrydale—you and your wife."

"Such a trifle as that," said Berrydale to his wife. "Talk of casting your bread upon the waters after that. There's a deal more in it than you'd think. Here have we been, ever since the old master's death, worrying about being turned out for younger folk, and then to be floored by old Robinson Crusoe. There's a deal more of his mother about him than his father."

"And a good thing too," said Mrs. Berrydale. "Give the old man his due, he was just, but his best friend couldn't have called him lovable. Mr. Anthony didn't say anything now of marrying?"

Berrydale shook his head. "He doesn't look that sort," he remarked. "Seems to me Netherlands

isn't likely to have a mistress for many a day. And perhaps it's all the better."

Left to himself, Roden relighted his cigar, then suddenly rose, and going to the window drew back the curtains and opened it wide. The air came in keen and clear, the darkness of the sky was bright with stars, but the moon had not yet risen. There was a solemn peace over the surroundings, and in the clear, fine atmosphere not a leaf stirred. Roden stepped on to the terrace, and looked out into the darkness. Again there came to him that sense of waiting, of expectancy, and as he leaned against the stone balustrade his thoughts went to Hester and the strangeness of their encounter. Hers was the first familiar face he had seen since setting foot in his kingdom ; at the sight of her and the sound of her voice he had realised more acutely than ever that it must be Hester or no one. To find her living near his own boundary wall when he had made up his mind to seek her half over the world if need be, struck him as a surprising piece of good fortune ; perhaps of more than that, for in his heart of hearts Roden was a man of much depth of feeling. "They have lost their money, I suppose," he said to himself, turning his eyes in the clear darkness to where Hester's habitation lay ; "and she has some quixotic ideas on the subject. Whatever other people have done, she might know *me* better than to suppose it

would make any difference. Was I not perennially hard up at intervals when she knew me? How often did she offer to forestall my allowance with a loan? Poor little girl, now I have enough and to spare for her and myself." He sighed in the darkness. Then he straightened himself and registered a vow there and then, on this first night of his return, to beat down by every means in his power the obstacles which lay between, to regain the old friendly footing, and then to pass on to something dearer still. He threw away the end of his cigar and watched it fly, a glowing spark, in the darkness. Then he re-entered the house. It was very silent. Even the lamps burned dimly in the hall, and threw great shadows over the distant corners, making the family portraits up the staircase glimmer eerily from their frames. There were several that Roden had feared in childhood: one a stern judge in a red robe whom he had looked upon vaguely as some kind of inflexible executioner. Now, as he passed by, he realised that the portrait greatly resembled his father in the coldness of the eyes and the thin, unsmiling lines of the lips.

Roden took up a lamp from a bracket and studied the portrait with interest, and then passed on to the next. This too, though only that of a country squire with his dogs around him, had the same touch of latent cruelty.



"A family characteristic," said Roden to himself, and a sudden impulse impelled him towards an old mirror framed in *repoussé* work which hung above the hearth. But his own face, despite its gravity, had a latent humour about the eyes and lips which deprived it, at all events for the moment, of the family trait.

Roden shook his head at his own ghostly reflection. "Not a doubt that it's there, deep down," he said to his own similitude. "There is, I suppose, a possible devil in most of us, and it only depends on environment whether it is brought out or kept under. That, no doubt, is partly what gives me the sensation that whatever comes I'll fight for her, because of her, and endure what comes to gain her."

He paused and glanced up the dusky shallow stairs. He pictured Hester coming down them with outstretched hands, or mounting them, to turn at the window, halfway up, to give a glance back to where he stood. So vivid was the imagining that he found himself standing at the lowest step looking upward, lamp in hand, waiting for her to appear.

He smiled involuntarily at the folly of it, and still with the lamp in his hand passed along the hall to a door which lay at the end of a passage down two shallow steps. Roden took a bunch of keys from his pocket and looked at them one by one. His brown, sinewy hand was quivering a little; he felt almost

childishly eager that the first key he inserted should be the right one. He examined the sections anxiously. One seemed smaller and slighter in make than the rest, and after a moment's hesitation he placed it in the keyhole. It resisted for a moment, then creaked stiffly as the lock turned back in the socket.

Roden drew a deep breath. To enter his mother's room seemed like going into a sanctuary ; he was half inclined to put the shoes from off his feet before setting them in this holy ground. All his life, despite her absence, despite the fact that she was not even a childish memory, his love for his mother had been a thing apart, something not to be talked about, a pleasure and a pain closely mingled, a vague essence that had kept him worthy in thought and action hitherto. Hester was the only one to whom he had ever mentioned his mother's name, and that fact alone might have been sufficient to disclose his feelings for her had he doubted them. He set the lamp down on a table and looked around him. He had never been here before ; the key had been in his father's possession always, jealously guarded, and returned after occasional dustings by Ann Berrydale, who had done much for the lonely young wife.

The room was old-fashioned and stiff, yet pretty enough in its way. There was a piano with faded magenta silk flutings, and a few pieces of music placed tidily on the top ; a bookcase, with some

cherished volumes of the poets showing mistily behind the glass doors, and a workbox of shining brown wood, with the key in the lock. Roden opened it gently, and fingered the reels of faded silk and cotton. There was a scrap of embroidery with the needle thrust in it, and a silver thimble, dull with much disuse. The needles in the tiny rose silk needle-case were half rusted, a sprig of lavender lay beneath. Roden touched them all with reverent fingers, rubbing the little thimble into brightness against his coat sleeve. An old-fashioned garden hat lay upon the head of the couch, its ribbons faded. Roden realised that in whatever his father had failed as husband, he had at least left his young wife's belongings sacred and untouched. Over the fireplace hung the portrait for which Roden since his arrival had searched in vain. It used to hang in the library, but, for some reason, had been removed and placed in the midst of the young wife's personal possessions.

Roden looked at it for a long time, placing the lamp on the top of the piano, where the light could fall most distinctly. It was a sweet face, disclosing beauty of expression rather than of feature; the colouring was exquisite, the eyes a clear brown, the hair pale gold, almost flaxen. There was a transparency and pleading glance which again recalled Hester, whose eyes were grey and whose hair was a

much darker shade. Roden stood for a long time motionless. Then he glanced round the room.

He knew he should never penetrate to the why and the wherefore of his mother's marriage, would never know whether family coercion had been brought to bear upon her, or whether, from some sudden impulse, she had married a man so many years her senior. He sat down upon the sofa, where so often she must have lain, and watched the lamplight shine upon her pictured face. There had not been many lovelier mistresses of Netherlands, and he felt a momentary pang of resentment against his father at the thought that under care and cherishing she might have been spared to him for all these years. Sitting there in her room he realised some of the solitude and lonely hours she must have sustained in the silent old house.

He rose and went to the window, where stood a little *escritoire*, the key within the lock. He turned it and put up the lid, touching the blurred blotting pad and the sheet of pale pink paper, upon which, in a hand that looked childish and half-formed, was written a date of more than nine-and-twenty years ago.

Roden's throat contracted suddenly. He closed the *escritoire* and placed the key in his pocket, then taking up the lamp, he left the room with its memories behind him.

CHAPTER V

IN WHICH DRUSILLA INDULGES IN PROPHECY

THERE was a dim light burning in the hall as Hester entered. It was a small, square hall, with a shallow staircase running up at the right. To the left was a door half ajar, showing a strip of light through the aperture. Hester put down on the hall table a small parcel that she carried, and moved towards the glimmer. Lying on a couch facing the door was Mrs. Percival. She looked up from her needlework as Hester entered.

Hester often thought she would give a great deal to see her mother's face lose its look of grey tension, to see it relax for even a moment from its expression of set endurance. It was a handsome face, with a square, determined chin and well-cut lips. The hair was quite snowy, and Hester still remembered the shock it had been to her to see it changed in a few weeks from dark brown to white.

The eyes were fine but inscrutable, eyes that kept guard over the emotions, never relaxing their watch for a moment. In their way they were terrible eyes,

never softened with tears or passing emotions. After that one glance, Mrs. Percival went on with her work. It was a very fine description of lace, needing care and attention. On the table beside her was a lamp, with the green shade tilted up to gain the undiminished light. Hester watched the thin, flexible hand moving to and fro, the needle reflecting back a steely flicker in the lamplight. For how many hours had she watched it, until the iron had eaten into her very soul, making her revolt unutterably against circumstance.

The room was very bare of furniture. There were no knick-knacks, such as a woman likes to have around her; merely the table, with a plain dark cloth, a few straight-backed chairs, a picture above the mantelpiece, while a couple of vases containing purple and white asters formed the sole touch of adornment in the room. Mrs. Percival's attire was as plain as her surroundings: a black gown with a narrow white band at neck and wrists, no ornament of any kind, only the wedding-ring upon the left hand. Yet as a child Hester could remember her mother dressed with exquisite taste in silks and laces and muslins, her fingers covered with rings, and, on gala occasions, diamonds twinkling in the brown locks which now were snow-white.

Nearly two years ago Mrs. Percival had had a stroke of paralysis, and now, though she could move

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about, it was feebly, holding on by the furniture, or with the aid of a stick and a person's arm. Her mental powers seemed as clear as ever, though a touch of something approaching fanaticism had developed in her which repelled Hester indescribably.

"Had the order come?" asked Mrs. Percival.

Her voice was low, but very clear and level, almost as unemotional as her face.

"It was at the post-office; it came by the later delivery," replied Hester.

"Where is it?"

"I left it in the hall," said Hester, half reluctantly. "Mother, do not work longer to-night; read a little, or talk to me. You have been working so many hours."

But the busy needle never flagged.

"I should like the thread," said Mrs. Percival, pointing to the empty reel which stood at her elbow; "another moment and I should have finished. Kindly bring it to me, Hester."

Hester obeyed mechanically. She knew the futility of asking her mother to cease her work before the clock struck nine; but to-night she had been stirred out of the usual monotone of existence, and her meeting with Roden, her encounter with the brightest period of her life, had caused her to beat her wings against the prison walls. She

wanted to talk to somebody, to get away from the chill of her mother's presence. She stood for a moment longer, then, on the pretext of taking off her hat and coat, she went out of the room.

On the opposite side of the hall was the kitchen. She could hear voices coming from that direction, or rather a voice. Drusilla was laying down the canine law to Jakes.

"Coming in with your feet all dirty mud," she was saying as Hester entered, "after the trouble I've taken to teach you to use the mat! Off you go this moment!"

Jakes was sitting on a square of carpet, looking the picture of guilt. Adjacent stood his supper on a tin plate, crowned with a peculiarly succulent bone, saved for him from the midday dinner.

Jakes was the only member of the household who dined late, and he knew to a marvel from the dinner of the family what his nightly portion was to be. He looked at the bone, and then he looked at Drusilla for a sign of yielding. He wanted to say, "It's half an hour late already owing to meeting with an old friend." His stumpy tail wagged appealingly, but Drusilla's finger never dropped, and he went slowly into the scullery, where lay the mat. The next moment he bounded into the kitchen, his tail a-quiver with expectation. But he knew better than to begin operations. He

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sniffed audibly at the bone, then looked at Drusilla. She nodded, but somewhat absent-mindedly. She was observing Hester, who stood before the fire holding out her hands to the blaze. It was a bright and comfortable kitchen, and seemed to have taken to itself some of Drusilla's cheerful personality, just as the sitting-room, where Mrs. Percival sat, contained an atmosphere which struck chill. Drusilla took up her knitting. The click of the needles broke the silence, that, and an accompaniment of gnawing from a distant corner, where Jakes was accomplishing the present desire of his heart.

Every now and then Drusilla darted a glance at Hester, and one of them the latter, looking up suddenly, intercepted. She drew up a chair and sat down, placing her elbows on the table and her chin on her palms.

"The mistress"— began Drusilla; but Hester raised her brows.

"She does not want me; she wants nothing but her work."

Drusilla went on with her knitting. She had long ago given up trying to solve the problem. A great sympathy for Hester filled her heart at all times, but a still greater pity for her mistress made her realise the irrevocable state of things. And though she might not always approve of that mistress's ways, she had too staunchly upheld her

for years to give up now, even to Hester, whom she had helped to bring into the world.

She glanced over her glasses at Hester's face, trying to analyse the change which had come into it. The grey eyes were wide and dark with feeling, making the clear pallor of the face even more apparent than usual. Hester's features at the moment held all the pathos of a tragedy of revolt, which, though sad in its way, was less intense than the hopelessness of the older tragedy in the room beyond. Against herself Drusilla was touched. She put down her knitting. "You're worn out, my lamb," she said, in the homely phraseology she had used when Hester was a little toddling child. "It's been a long walk for you. Let me make you a cup of nice hot cocoa when I get the mistress hers."

A lump rose in Hester's throat, and her eyes clouded over. She shook her head.

"It isn't that," she said. "I'm not really tired, Drusilla, it's only— Oh, Drusilla, is this going on for *ever*? You needn't shake your head as if you did not understand—this unnatural existence?"

She glanced in the direction of the sitting-room and gave an involuntary shudder. Something in her action made Drusilla's strong features contract.

"Don't, Miss Hester; what can't be cured must be endured. I thought she seemed a little brighter when I went in just now."

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"Brighter!" exclaimed Hester. "She is never different to me. She does not care whether I am near her or not. I believe one day, like"—

Drusilla half started from her seat; her hand trembled as she supported herself by it on the table.

"Would you make her sup the last drop of sorrow?" she asked, half fiercely. "God knows she's had her own and somebody else's share. And now you'd help to heap it on her, as the other did."

"And if I went away," said Hester defiantly, "she would not care. All her love was given to Cynthia. She has never shown me any since I came home. I remember her different when I was a little thing; she even used to come and kiss me. And you know, Drusilla, when—when it happened I might have stayed with Aunt Feilding; she wanted to keep me."

"I know she did," interposed Drusilla, in visible disapproval; "and more shame for her to try to set you against doing right. She's a worldly person; I never could abide her."

"She was very kind to me," interposed Hester. "And do you know what prevented me? It was"—pointing in the direction of the sitting-room—"her face, and the sudden whiteness of her hair. It frightened me; I felt I could not give her up, and I hoped that I might be a help and a comfort to her, though for years I had seen so little of her."

"And so you are a comfort," asseverated Drusilla ; but she spoke with the emphasis of one who wishes to make assurance doubly sure, rather than of one whose heart is in her words.

Hester shook her head. "No," she said slowly ; "not once does it give her pleasure to see me. Not once does her face alter or brighten at the sight of me. If it did, I'd do anything for her, Drusilla," putting her hand on the gnarled fingers of the old servant. "You know I've really tried."

"Yes, my dear, yes."

"And I'll go on trying—I mean to ; but oh, if she would only seem to understand. Why should one's life be a misery because of other people ?"

"It's in the law of things," said Drusilla, softening her words by stroking the slender fingers near her own, "and there's no going against it. The sins of the"—

Hester shuddered.

"Don't say it. It's cruel and unjust. Yes, it is. We each have our life to live, and why should it be spoilt for us by others ? It's cruelly unjust."

"Oh, my dear, don't talk like that." Drusilla was honestly horrified at this criticism of the biblical law. "It's just got to be borne, my lamb, and I know you'll bear it. I don't wish her any harm, but Miss Cynthia will suffer one of these days for breaking the commandments."

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"Why should she?" asked Hester. "I don't suppose she will. I wonder where she is, Drusilla. I should like to see her. Imagine not knowing my own only sister. We seem to be made on a different plan to other families. They don't have such tragedies in their lives. Drusilla, I should not care if there seemed some hope of better things, if one day matters would clear themselves, and we could live like other people. Surely, even now, life need not be so terrible. I picture myself here year after year, missing all that makes life worth having, growing a little faded, then greyer and sadder, with perhaps the look mother has." She paused, and at the sight of her face Drusilla looked away, feeling the impotence of words.

"I suppose we're desperately poor," continued Hester. "We only have the barest necessities, and there is no beauty in the house; no grace, but the flowers I bring in from the garden. Even those she never glances at. Need life be so dreary, Drusilla? Look how shabby I am, how plainly dressed." She lifted her arms from the table and held them out towards Drusilla. "Somehow I can manage blouses, but the seams of coats will never come quite straight. I wish I had learned dressmaking instead of singing; how much more useful it would have been. A thousand pities one can't know such things beforehand."

"I'm sure you always look very nice, Miss Hester."

Drusilla glanced over her glasses at the slim figure and the well-poised head, with its masses of sunny-brown hair, which no shabby surroundings could dim.

Hester laughed, and though there was no mirth in its tones, the sound imposed upon Jakes, who leaped upon her knee for his after-dinner repose. Hester stroked his head softly; her lips quivered. Drusilla knitted rapidly.

"The mistress has got none better," she remarked.

"No," said Hester meditatively; "we are both clothed, and that is about all. You are no better off yourself, Drusilla, and I notice that you have to patch your gowns and darn your aprons lately."

Drusilla puckered her brows.

"There's a deal of wear in them," she said, "and I never could bear to see things thrown away before their time."

Again Hester laughed, and this time Jakes noted the difference. He wriggled up, and placed a protesting kiss upon the hand of his mistress.

Hester leaned forward, the light full upon her grey eyes and the trouble of her lips.

"If I were only half as good and patient as you, Drusilla, how proud of myself I should be. If you would only let me do more about the house—something more *solid* than dusting and the washing of the tea-things. To scrub I should not be in the

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least ashamed. It goes to my heart every time I see you on your dear old knees. I verily believe it would take some of the discontented spirit out of me to wield a scrubbing-brush."

Drusilla shook her head in rebuke, but there was a mist before her kind, faded eyes, and she dropped a stitch in her knitting.

"Give it to me," said Hester. "Oh, there's nine striking. Drusilla, do you believe in *Fate*?"

Drusilla visibly wavered.

"I can't say that I do, Miss Hester, yet there's many a thing difficult to account for. It seems almost as if things were bound to happen, whatever one did to fight against them; and some people have good fortune, while others never enjoy a bit of luck all their lives. But how much is Fate, and where Providence comes in, is sometimes difficult to tell."

Hester rose, and stretched herself.

"I wish one knew. I believe there must be something in 'the moving finger' of dear old Omar Khayyam. Drusilla, I feel to-night that things may change."

Drusilla rose to her feet, looking quite stern.

"Be thankful if they don't, Miss Hester; they can't well alter for the better. Just be thankful for the quiet you've got. It's borne in upon me that this is no more than the lull before the storm, and that one of these days"—

She spoke with the stern, far-seeing gaze and uplifted hand of a prophetess of old, and Hester looked at her with a fascinated glance.

"Drusilla," called a voice from the room beyond.

CHAPTER VI

RODEN DESIRES A HOUSE-WARMING, AND PREPARES FOR IT

IT was an ideal autumn day, with a suggestion of frost to crisp the atmosphere and enough sunshine to set the ruddy foliage aflame.

Roden, on his way from one of the farms, paused to survey the beauty of the surroundings. From this vantage ground in the field he could look across his own woods, now tinted in all the glory of russet leaves, while nearer still lay his neighbour's garden, with a green stretch of lawn and a few red geraniums still braving the elements. The ground on which he was standing belonged to Miss Octavia Braithwaite's small property—there was, in fact, a short cut from the field into the garden of the Larches. Roden craned his neck to obtain a nearer view, trying to distinguish Miss Octavia's figure.

"I'll just look in for a minute," he said to himself, vaulting the rail which spanned a gap in the hedge. He heard her voice, but as he rounded the corner his approach was unnoticed. Miss Octavia,

a hoe in one hand, a large bottle of embrocation in the other, was busy admonishing a small girl clad in a scanty blue cotton frock.

"Now, you must tell your mother to rub the liniment well into the painful part of her neck. You will have to help her, Jinny."

"Yes, miss," said Jinny promptly, baring a very thin, bony little arm, and extending it dramatically towards Miss Octavia. "I can rub *ever* so hard, I can."

"Very well; now run away," said Miss Octavia, suppressing a smile. "Ask Simon to give you an apple as you pass the tool-house, and *don't forget the gate.*"

Jinny's minute person had hardly disappeared when Miss Octavia's eye lighted upon Roden, a much-amused observer of the proceedings.

"Now, this *is* nice of you," she exclaimed, slipping one hand out of her gardening glove in order to greet him. "You won't mind if I go on working? My dear Anthony, let me advise you never in a moment of misguided benevolence to start a free dispensary. They hardly give me a moment's peace, and I am coming to the conclusion that Netherlands must be a hotbed for rheumatism, so popular is that liniment."

Roden watched her, an amused smile making his face a pleasant one. She was an odd, sturdy figure

in a short skirt, thick boots, and gardening apron, a practical gardener who grew her own celery and tomatoes, and won prizes at the local shows with the help of a boy or two. She ruled the villagers with a rod of iron, having lived in their midst for fifteen years or more, and, despite her occasional sharp words, they came to her more often than to the usual fountain-heads for alleviation, mental and bodily. In her particular sanctum, which was far from being the usual description of boudoir, stood a medicine chest full of homely and useful drugs, for the doctor lived at a distance, and Miss Octavia possessed of medical lore that little knowledge which is said to be such a dangerous thing. In her instance it had sufficed, for the village was a healthy one in the main, and she and the doctor shared the dangerous cases between them, Miss Octavia sitting up all night with a patient when vitality seemed at its lowest ebb and the doctor unable to stay. Indeed, there was many a boy and girl in the village who, but for Miss Octavia, would never have reached man's estate. She loved to rule, and all her interests lay in their midst. She waged hygienic warfare against the village, and her views on sanitation were beginning to take effect; but in spite of all these homely duties she had not narrowed, for she took the keenest interest in affairs of the day, read the quarterlies, had a running

subscription with the libraries, and sedulously read her daily paper. Her face was almost weather-beaten, plain but kindly, with a shrewd twinkle in the eye which spoke of considerable human nature and a wisdom none the less useful by reason of being worldly. She was a source of affectionate interest to Roden, who smiled now at the sight of her energy.

“I never see you working in this way that I don’t long to take the implement from your hand and have a go at the weeds myself,” he remarked, after a momentary pause. Roden was always at his best with Miss Octavia, whom he had known for some years.

“If you keep your own property as it ought to be kept, my dear Anthony, you’ll have plenty to occupy your time. It has lapsed terribly since your father’s ill-health, and I was shocked the other day, when taking a short cut through the copse to Barton’s farm, to see how overgrown the place has become.”

“You shall give me your advice in the matter later on, if you will.” Roden took out his watch as he spoke. “I have an appointment with Bowen, the bailiff, in ten minutes’ time. And I desperately wanted a chat with you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me so, instead of letting me hold forth on the subject of village aladies and their

cures?" remonstrated Miss Octavia. "I thought neither held your attention. How dull you will find life down here, my poor boy, without society, unless you import your fashionable friends from town."

"I have none," said Roden. "In my two years' wanderings no one attached himself to me, and *vice versa*. Ainsley is, and always has been, 'mine own familiar friend.' I must be an unsociable kind of chap, for I'm slow to make a friendship."

"But tenacious to hold when made?" queried Miss Octavia. "Well, perhaps you are right: a tried friend is a jewel to be prized. One loses a good deal in this life, though, by being too cautious."

"It is not a matter of caution so much as indifference," said Roden, half apologetically. "And I think the ways of childhood have much to do with later life. You know, I saw few people, and was much repressed — terribly repressed; and affection thrown back upon itself dies out eventually from sheer inanition."

"Oh no, nothing of the kind," exclaimed Miss Octavia warmly; "it is always there, lying latent, gathering up in full force for"— She paused, and darted a look at her companion.

"Yes?" Roden's face had changed a little, had become almost expressionless.

"For—somebody," ended Miss Octavia, rather inadequately, noting that he was repressing himself. "Now you must go and leave me to my multifarious duties. I have to see poor Mary Brewster this afternoon. Come and dine with me to-night. Seven o'clock to the instant; none of your fashionable hours, mind."

"I was going to suggest that you should come and dine with me, Aunt Octavia. Let me have a mild house-warming. Here have I been dining in solitary state, with the exception of the night I came to you, seven dreary evenings in succession."

"You will never be able to endure it," said Miss Octavia, shaking her head; "there is literally no one within several miles of this Sleepy Hollow. I shall see you returning to town in despair, and putting up at your club for the sake of a little congenial society. Of course, you must have reflected that you will have to go far afield to get it here?"

"Solitude is infinitely preferable to uncongenial society," said Roden, digging out a weed with his stick absent-mindedly. "I am no believer in putting up with the worst, just because one can't get"— He paused, and carefully prodded the weed into place again.

"Yes?" queried Miss Octavia, darting a look at him. In her heart she guessed the reason of

his absorption, but she was shrewd enough to realise also that the surest way to gain a man's confidence is not to force it, but to await the time he chooses to give it. Indeed, Miss Octavia had many masculine qualities herself; but, though strong-minded and with all a man's balance and judgment, her heart was essentially womanly and her intuition swift.

"The best," said Roden, with a short laugh not remarkable for mirth, at the same time straightening himself to his full height. "Now, how about to-night? Do come to me. There are numbers of matters on which I want your advice, and here you are always being fetched because somebody's baby has measles, or the village pump is out of repair. Do they ever let you alone?"

"Now and then," said Miss Octavia, with the infectious laugh Roden liked to hear. "It must be owned, though, that they generally choose inauspicious occasions on which to develop maladies. Perhaps it would be better to come to you, and to leave no address behind to which they can track me."

"Berrydale will be delighted to hear that a visitor is coming. Now, I must be off, or Bowen will execrate me, and he really has very little spare time on his hands."

"Good - bye until to - night, then," said Miss

Octavia. "I feel positively excited at the prospect of evading the dispensary for one evening. I shall really have to start 'hours of attendance,' now that I have a prospect of dining out occasionally."

She nodded to him cheerily when he reached the other side of the hedge, and she listened to his footsteps going down the road with her chin on the hands which supported the hoe. Her whole face altered indescribably, falling into motherly lines, which made her plain features almost beautiful.

"My dear lad," she said softly under her breath, as if half ashamed of allowing her emotion to be witnessed even by herself. "I wonder who she is."

But before Roden had turned the corner she was energetically prodding the hoe into the ground once again, for emotions were not weaknesses she encouraged with frequency.

Roden walked on quickly. He was already late for his appointment, though ordinarily a punctual man. Despite the fact, however, he proceeded back to Netherlands by the longest route, for the sole reason that it led him past Hester's abiding place. Not once since that first meeting had he so much as caught a glimpse of her, and he was beginning to realise that she had been right in saying that no intercourse would take place between them.

She was rarely, if ever, out of his thoughts; he was himself astonished at the persistency with which she came before his mental vision.

As he neared the gate in the wall he slackened his pace, half hoping that by the exercise of dominant will power he might draw her out to him. Not once, but many times, had he made up his mind to call, yet the memory of Hester's appeal caused him to relinquish his intention. He could not bring himself to intrude upon their privacy. The gate remained closed, and there was not even the sound of Jakes' bark to break the silence. Roden felt that Jakes was his friend. He lingered for a moment by the gate, which was set in a high wall; indeed, the whole cottage had been built by the original owner with a conventional retirement which rendered it impossible to see the house from any point. Above the elm trees, thinned now by autumn winds, a line of grey smoke from one of the chimneys trailed upwards in a leisurely fashion and melted into the grey of the sky. As he stood there Roden's fingers tingled to ring the bell; indeed, he touched it once, and then, as he dropped it, he felt a ridiculous and almost overmastering impulse to act the schoolboy and to peep cautiously through the keyhole into which Hester had inserted her key on the evening of their meeting. He shrugged his

shoulders and passed on with an expression half amused, half irritated. It seemed so amazing that a pale slip of a girl should have aroused in him the marauding instincts of his forefathers, the desire to force his way in and carry off his own in the face of obstacles—

“The simple plan,
That he shall take who has the power,
And he shall keep who can.”

Roden gave a reluctant smile and turned down the lane on to his own land, starting a partridge, which flew across the hedge with a whirr of wings.

“There’s only one thing to be done,” he said to himself, after Bowen had gone and he sat alone at lunch, “and I’ll do it.”

There was still much of the boy about him, despite his habitual air of gravity. He felt really excited over his house-warming, and interviewed Ann Berrydale on the subject of the dinner.

“Put your best foot foremost,” he said. “You know Miss Octavia thinks me very fortunate to possess the finest cook in the village.”

Forthwith the drawing-room with its old-fashioned furniture was opened up, and the cabinets of china polished. The covers were stripped off the faded rose brocades of the spindle-legged chairs and couches, and a couple of palms

were brought in from the conservatory. When Ann and her hirelings had retreated, Roden surveyed the room from the doorway with an expression of dissatisfaction. There was the all too palpable lack of womanly touch, for, with the best intentions, the taste of Ann Berrydale needed cultivation. It was better a few minutes later when the fires at either end of the long room were blazing cheerily, throwing out reflections on the tarnished gold of the picture frames and dim lights from the polished surface of the tables.

There was something stately and old-world in the very severity of the room, yet it sadly needed that air of comfort so often owned by the most out-at-elbows apartments.

Roden leaned against the lintel of the door, a puzzled frown gathering between his eyes. He felt all the charm that perforce surrounds old-world furniture; there was even a quaintness in the atmosphere, the slight pungency and fragrance that comes from rose leaves long stored. Then the tall vases on the mantelpiece caught his eye, and partly solved the problem.

"*Flowers!*" he exclaimed; "that's what the room wants. There should be flowers, of course."

He seized the tall jars with a recklessness which would have made a connoisseur's blood run cold,

and depositing them in the library went out in search of floral trophies. The conservatory had as yet nothing to show, but in the garden he found a few late roses in a sheltered corner, and some clusters of chrysanthemums. Of autumn foliage there was a goodly store, and he returned with an armful.

"It's no use leaving them to Ann's tender mercies," he said to himself, surveying his plunder; "so here goes."

He arranged them with clumsy but careful fingers, pulling off the stalks in a way sad to witness, and crowding far too many into one jar. In spite of it they were a great improvement to the room, when he had them back in position. The sun was breaking through the mist of the October day, throwing a red glow over the surroundings. On the wide hearths the fires burnt steadily, and already the room sunned itself in an air of habitation and homeliness. To complete the illusion, a tabby cat from the kitchen regions crept in and lay down before the hearth. Roden surveyed his handiwork with an air of boyish satisfaction. He himself always spent the evenings in the library, the most comfortable room in the house. He set the piano open, glanced over the pile of music in a little cabinet, and touched the keys. The mellow notes—a little

out of tune, like the surroundings—lingered in the corners of the room mournfully, as if in memory of the fingers which had last roused their melody. Roden, with whom music was a passion, felt the echoes reverberating in every fibre.

A sense of solitude and unrest seemed to lie upon the room, in spite of the open casements and the fires upon the hearth, that atmosphere of the past which pervades houses which have been long uninhabited, as if ghosts from the far-away looked out from every crevice. Yet, on the whole, as he turned once again in the doorway, the air of the room struck pleasantly, and loomed as a background for the inevitable castle in Spain.

CHAPTER VII

MISS OCTAVIA MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

THAT afternoon Hester grew tired of inactivity and of the inevitable monotony of her existence. Since her meeting with Roden she had shunned the highways and byways, keeping her energies for household matters and the garden, doing anything and everything to keep herself employed, and fighting almost fiercely against the longing which seized her for some of the old joys of existence. Truth to tell, she had not half enough to do. To make work is not by any means the same as that real work which must be accomplished willy-nilly, through heartache and suffering, whether the worker be inclined or no, and there were moments when, as she had told Drusilla, some hard manual labour would have been an absolute relief. She worked in the garden, it is true, with an energy calculated to delight Miss Octavia, had she been there to see, but autumn gardening is depressing work at best. There is in it none of the joy of spring, no sign of green things breaking the ground,

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or of the bursting of twigs into leaf. When she had tied up the chrysanthemums from contact with the sodden earth, had swept up the fallen leaves and weeded the paths, there seemed no further need for her services. She had sunk into a monotone before Roden had broken up the calm of routine, and now she dreaded yet longed to meet him, to share the society and ideas of someone approaching her own age and tastes, yet knowing that, through force of circumstance, the old comradeship must be forsaken.

She was too simple over her friendship for Roden to show inconsistency, as an older woman might have shown it; to forbid him to come, and yet to feel aggrieved that he never rang the bell. She had not even analysed her feelings for him; indeed, as yet, she looked upon him only in the light of a friend of her prosperity, with whom she might so often have uttered the magic words, "Do you remember?"

She took off her gardening gloves, shook a leaf or two from her skirt, put her hair out of her eyes where the breeze had blown it, and crossed the hall to the sitting-room. Her mother sat in her customary position, her fingers, as usual, ceaselessly employed.

"I am going for a walk, mother," she said, pausing in the doorway. "Do you want me?"

The futility of the words struck her even as she uttered them. Mrs. Percival hardly glanced up.

"No, thank you," she replied, and Hester was going, when Mrs. Percival's voice arrested her.

"Do not be out in the roads after dark," she said; "I do not think it is safe, and please take Jakes with you."

"I shall soon be back," said Hester, lingering another moment in the doorway, "and Jakes always comes with me. He is great company."

Mrs. Percival said nothing further; indeed, she did not glance up again from her work. Hester crossed the hall and went upstairs slowly, a swelling in her throat. She put her head out of her bedroom window and looked across the Netherlands woods. But it was not of Netherlands or of its master she was thinking at the moment.

"It is the first time she has ever seemed to care whether I come or go," she said to herself. "If she would now and then show interest, if I could get a little closer to her, it would not seem half so hard, so"— She broke off and rose to her feet, putting on her hat and coat with impatient fingers that shook a little.

"I believe I might even endure the thought of years of it if only she would let me understand her. There surely can be no need of such a barrier. It

is a case of the prodigal daughter; the one who stays always gets the worst of it."

She drew on her gloves slowly, standing at the window, and this time her thoughts went in another direction.

"It has been far harder since he came," she said, looking out across the sea of swaying russet-tinted leaves. "One gets stolid in time, and I was beginning not to mind very much about the dulness."

She ran downstairs and took a stick from the stand in the hall, a stick on which was a silver plate with her initials. It had been a birthday present from Roden when she was going to the moors one year, and it had done yeoman service ever since.

Jakes, needless to say, was waiting for her in the garden, absolutely frenzied with joy at the prospect of a walk. It is true that he had been down to the village in search of adventure that morning, being an intimate friend of the grocer's dog, but it had puzzled him greatly that his mistress had apparently given up any intention of outdoor excursions for the future. The mere sight of the walking-stick was enough to convince him that a genuine walk was in prospect, and as he circled round her he uttered barks of congratulation almost loud enough to have reached Roden, at that moment busy on house-warming preparations. Hester walked along

quickly. She had not gone far before the rapid exercise and the keenness of the air caused her spirits to rise as they had not risen for many a day. She felt it her duty, however, to repress both herself and Jakes when, after a fleet run across a field, she sat down on a stile to rest, Jakes panting but happy beside her. Hester suddenly took his head between her hands and looked into his brown eyes. Jakes adored his mistress, interpreting her every word as a dog can. He panted in the fussy way peculiar to his kind, and tried hard to kiss her face. But she held him firmly, and he desisted.

“Jakes dear, I feel—oh, I can’t describe how I feel. Just as if I were young again, just as if the monotony meant to stop, as if a change might come to us before very long.”

Breaking off suddenly, she raised one hand, and Jakes gave a short interrogatory bark, as if to say, “What are you talking about changes for? Isn’t this good enough?”

The next moment Hester heard a sound behind her, and turned with a start. Jakes barked again, this time at the new-comer, who proved to be an elderly person in a tweed coat and skirt and plain hat. Hester sprang to her feet and made way.

“I am so sorry,” she said, colouring hotly; “I hope you have not been waiting long.”

“Hardly a moment,” said Miss Octavia briskly.

"You were talking to your dog. What a fine fellow he is—such a handsome, intelligent head."

Hester at last recognised Miss Octavia, whom she had naturally encountered now and then but had shunned, as she had shunned everybody of her own station. The cordiality in the speaker's face and voice went straight to Hester's heart.

"I have had him for several years," she said, colouring again a little as she spoke; "he almost talks."

Miss Octavia nodded; she was still stroking Jakes' smooth head, but her eyes were quietly surveying Hester's face with its dark grey eyes, a face almost transparent in colouring and expression, with a certain freshness and innocence which made those who saw her feel a sudden desire to take care of her. Miss Octavia noted the slenderness of the figure in the shabby little coat, a garment hardly fitted to withstand the elements, and noted, too, with her medical eye, the bright flush which faded so suddenly into pallor. She felt a great desire—as the children say—to "make friends."

There seemed no apparent reason for lingering, yet Miss Octavia felt impelled to sudden action, and hers was not a nature which believed in losing an opportunity or in putting off until the morrow. She still smoothed Jakes' head; all dogs loved her

by instinct, and Jakes had responded at once by putting his nose against her rough tweed sleeve. Hester, too, liked the shrewd face—there was a power, a strength about it which made people forget that Miss Octavia was an exceedingly plain woman.

“We are neighbours, surely,” said Miss Octavia, less in inquiry than assertion.

“Yes,” said Hester, in response.

“I wish we might become friends,” went on Miss Octavia quaintly, putting out a capacious, gauntleted hand; “why not?”

Hester smiled against herself, and put her own small palm against the large one. “I wish we could,” she said impulsively, colouring again.

“What a delightful little face it is,” said Miss Octavia to herself, and aloud, “And why not? There are few enough of us in all conscience; we ought to be friends. You know I called once, a long time ago, and came away with the sensation that I had intruded.”

Hester coloured painfully once again. “I am sorry,” she said; “but my mother is a complete invalid, and sees no one. She is partly paralyzed, and—and”—

“But would she not allow you to come and have tea with me now and then?” asked Miss Octavia. “Surely she would have no objection? It would be dull for you with an old woman, but in such

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benighted regions as these any change is better than none."

"*Dull!*" exclaimed Hester quickly, divulging more than she knew, "why, it would be simply delightful. I have often admired your garden ; you know a bit of it can be seen from the field near the farm."

Then she checked herself and shook her head. "I will ask, but I am afraid it will be no use."

Miss Octavia positively sighed. "Do your best to persuade her," she said. "If, as you say, it would be delightful to you, it would be fifty times more so to me to have a young face round me now and then. Would your mother allow me to send her a few grapes, or a magazine now and then ?"

Hester shook her head, feeling she must appear absolutely churlish. "She is a great worker, and rarely reads," she remarked ; "and as to the grapes, you are very kind, but"—

"But I must not send them ?" queried Miss Octavia. "Well, you know best."

She held out her hand in farewell. "You will come if you can ? And, in any case, you will let me know if at any time I can be of use to you ? My dear, I think we might be great friends."

Hester's nervousness gave way before the kindly unconventionality of the remark. "I am sure we might," she responded ; "and perhaps," with

wistful interrogation, "we may some day, if not now?"

Miss Octavia nodded. The next moment she had climbed the stile and was walking down the road in the direction of her own gate.

"Now, I wonder," she said to herself, with a puzzled frown, "what is the skeleton in that household? Is the mother melancholy mad, and is the eminently respectable person who gave me the cold shoulder when I called her keeper? That charming girl to be burdened with trouble just when she ought to be in the heyday of enjoyment. What an extraordinarily uneven world it is. Look at Enid Drake, absolutely pampered—though why *she* should come into my mind at this moment any more than half a dozen other spoilt girls I do not know. Perhaps because, in spite of her wealth and easily gratified desires, she seems anything but happy, and perhaps because she is more charming to plain Octavia Braithwaite than the majority of her spoiled compeers."

Miss Octavia was inside her own gate now, and it said much for her absorption that she passed through and left it open—an act for which she would have soundly scolded the smallest boy in the village. To obey their elders, shut gates, and use the door-mat was, according to Miss Octavia's notions, the whole duty of childhood, and meant

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laying the foundation for many an excellent future citizen. She passed through the hall and into her own sanctum to the right, a sanctum which resembled a man's room rather than a woman's, with its well-worn brown leather chairs, writing-table, and scattered papers, with a few good prints upon the walls and a fox's brush over the mantelpiece. The casual visitor almost expected to see a pipe rack and tobacco jar to complete the illusion; but Miss Octavia, strong-minded as she was, had no tolerance for cigarette-smoking femininity. There was a little stack of letters awaiting her and several newspapers, but she brushed them all aside and rang for tea. A fire burnt in the grate, a log fire which sent out opalescent lights and sputtered softly now and then in the cosy way peculiar to well-seasoned logs.

When the tea-tray was brought in the maid set a small copper kettle on the logs and withdrew. Miss Octavia remained buried in thought until the kettle hissed a little preparatory to boiling over, and then she took an old-fashioned silver and enamel tea-caddy from the cupboard and made the tea. There were all manner of unsuspected feminine touches about Miss Octavia, and this was one of them.

She sipped her tea in a leisurely way, as if she loved it, her feet on the fender, her eyes fixed on

the glowing logs. Her thoughts were so busy with Hester that she almost forgot it was time to dress for the house-warming, and even when her teacup was put aside she still lingered over the fire, lulled by the warmth from waking dreams to those of reality.

She awoke with a start as the logs fell inward with a scattering of embers. The room was nearly dark, and she groped for the matches in the little brass box on the mantelpiece. She was near the door, candle in hand, when she recollected her letters. Ordinarily they might have waited until morning, for the post from the village had left an hour before, but for some reason she felt impelled towards them, and taking them up she examined them one by one. Last in the pile was the only letter of interest—a large square envelope inscribed in a clever hand that suggested originality and striking characteristics.

“Now, I wonder what Enid is writing about,” said Miss Octavia, a frown gathering between her brows. “I have not answered her last letter, and this is too much of a good thing.”

“Dear Miss Octavia,” the letter ran, “you will say, with more reason than ever, that it is a small world, when I tell you that my uncle and aunt, their men-servants and their maid-servants,—indeed, the whole household, including myself,—are coming

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to take up their abode within hailing distance of you. You may remember that Spindle Manor was for sale some time ago. As it is Elizabethan, and said to possess a ghost, my aunt preferred it to the others Uncle Shan had on his list, though there has as yet been no means of ascertaining whether the ghost goes with the family or the estate. However, it delights me to think that, judged by motoring distance, you are only about half an hour away. We leave here almost directly, stopping in town for a day or two to do a little shopping."

Miss Octavia folded the letter thoughtfully, and put it into the envelope.

"That is why the thought of Enid occurred to me just now," she said, and was half-way upstairs when another thought came to her. She paused in the corridor, looked meditative, and nodded to herself. "It might be an excellent idea," she remarked, and passed on to her room.

CHAPTER VIII

MISS OCTAVIA OFFERS RODEN SHREWD ADVICE

RODEN, accompanied by the tabby cat, was waiting in the drawing-room when Miss Octavia was announced. He had been turning over the music and playing a bar here and there, but just before the arrival of his one guest he had subsided into a spindle-legged chair by the hearth, with the cat upon his knee. Something in his attitude, in the solitary air of the room, despite its warmth and light, made Miss Octavia sigh a little as she entered. There is always something a little desolate in the case of a man without any feminine element to help him to entertain, and Roden had not had sufficient time to school his features.

His grave face broke into a smile on her entrance, and he came forward, taking both her hands in his. "Welcome to Netherlands," he said.

Miss Octavia nodded her thanks brightly. She looked quite a stately figure in her black silk gown with some old lace on the bodice and a diamond ornament or two.

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"What a charming room," she said appreciatively, as she seated herself. "There's a genuine old-world air about it which one rarely sees nowadays, a look as if the furniture had not come direct from the dealers, but had grown old gracefully in the home of its ancestors."

"I'm so glad you like it," responded Roden. "Truth to tell, the mouldy atmosphere struck me more than the age of the furniture. It seemed to need endless air and sun before I dare ask you to spend an evening in it. The fires did wonders, and—do you see my admirable arrangement of flowers?"

Miss Octavia glanced up at the stiff posies in the vases. There was a mist before her eyes as she glanced from them to Roden's face.

"A house-warming, indeed," she remarked. "You have a delightful old home, Anthony."

Roden leaned forward, his hands clasped round his knee. "I suppose so," he said. "It really is a dear old place, and I mean to look after it well, and do many a needed improvement. It has run very wild; you were quite justified in what you said. Bowen is an excellent fellow, though, and he seems almost as fond of the place as I am. You see, he was frightfully restricted lately."

"His father was, as you know, bailiff before him," said Miss Octavia; "and Bowen has known Nether-

lands ever since he could toddle. He is a capital young man, so practical and clear-headed."

The gong sounded at that moment, and Roden offered her his arm.

Ann had acquitted herself nobly, and their dinner was all that could be desired. When Berrydale had left the room Miss Octavia leaned across the table to Roden. "I have a special favour to ask," she said.

"To the half of my kingdom," said Roden, who was thoroughly enjoying Miss Octavia's shrewd remarks and the unaccustomed sensation of sociability. However well he might do without society in the day, he cordially detested eating alone and spending the long evening like a misanthrope.

"Do not be rash," said Miss Octavia, smiling. She had risen, and both were standing beneath the portrait of the late master of the house. "Suppose you had made that remark to a younger woman without my merciful instincts. And, my dear Anthony, there are several subscription lists for deserving charities to which you will have to put your name sooner or later."

"It's no use meeting trouble half-way," said Roden, smiling. "Now, what is it? Something far more difficult than subscriptions, I imagine."

"A plan that will fall in with your own

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inclinations thoroughly"—Miss Octavia was glancing up into the cold, thin-lipped face of the portrait. "Simply that you will smoke in the library. You do, of course, ordinarily? I thought so; and let me sit and talk to you there. It sounds ridiculous, but, charming as your drawing-room is, spindle-legged chairs never seem built for confidences."

"Confidences?" remarked Roden, a lurking smile in his eye. "Have you many to give me?"

Miss Octavia was equal to the occasion. "Many," she said; "so many, indeed, that I fear one house-warming will not meet the case."

"Well, have another to-morrow if you like," said Roden eagerly; "why in the world should you not dine here every evening? If you only *knew* the difference it makes."

Some of his solitariness crept into his voice as he spoke. Miss Octavia smiled, contrasting his well-cut, sweet-tempered, yet somewhat stern mouth with the thin lips of the portrait. "You must take to yourself a wife," she said. Then, as he made no response, "Well, is it to be library or drawing-room?"

"Library by all means," he said; "the only comfortable chairs in the house are there. One for you and one for me."

Miss Octavia moved round the room surveying the portraits in turn.

"By the way, Anthony, I met a most charming girl to-day. She positively has a dear little face, all eyes and expression. You can almost see through her; she has a way of flushing and paling which a society beauty would give her ears for."

Roden paused in the act of striking a match. The description put his own impressions into words with curious distinctness. "A stranger, of course," he said the next moment. "You must know every soul in the village."

Miss Octavia nodded. "Every soul," she said, "man, woman, and child. This girl I met to-day has lived in the village for some time, and yet to-day for the first time I spoke to her. Indeed, I have never been sufficiently near to have a thoroughly good look at her."

The match was steadily burning down towards Roden's hand, but he never attempted to light his cigar.

"You will burn your fingers," said Miss Octavia.

Roden extinguished the match and put it carefully upon one of the dessert plates. Then he looked full at Miss Octavia. "It must have been Hester Percival," he remarked quietly, and held the door open for Miss Octavia to pass out. As she did so their glances met, and without another word Miss Octavia understood.

A steadily glowing fire burned in the library, in a

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huge cavernous grate under a canopy of carved oak. The furniture was oak too, heavily carved and nearly black with age, toning well with the buff hangings drawn across the windows. The walls were covered with books, some of them in rich bindings which reflected back the gleams of gold where the firelight struck upon them. A huge chair covered in buff leather stood on either side of the hearth, and on the centre table a large reading-lamp shed a pleasant, subdued glow.

"A jewel of a room," said Miss Octavia in a low tone. Netherlands was to her a *terra incognita*, and she owned all her sex's pleasure in exploring the unknown. Roden wheeled a chair round to face the fire. Then he hunted her up a fire-screen, and brought from some dim corner near the window a footstool and a cushion, doing his *devoirs* with that swift intuition of a woman's possible wants which comparatively few men possess.

"Now, do think of yourself," said Miss Octavia. "I am simply lapped in luxury. Light your cigar and sit down."

The cigar was well alight—indeed, a thin line of grey ash had formed upon it—before either spoke again. Miss Octavia had the gift of sympathy, and knew when to be silent.

The firelight played on Roden's face as he leaned forward. Miss Octavia surveyed him from the

shadow of her fire-screen, noting the tense expression of the mouth. Roden's face, always grave, to-night wore an expression deeper still. A little jet of gas spurted out from between the bars, and he looked up with a start. Then he leaned impulsively towards Miss Octavia.

"There's something very odd in your having made Hester's acquaintance to-day of all days," he said.

"Why?" Miss Octavia put the question quietly.

"Because to-night"—he hesitated for an instant, and looked her frankly in the face—"because to-night I meant to ask you to do a little—match-making on my behalf."

"Then it is Hester Percival?"

Roden nodded decisively. "Hester Percival it always has and always will be."

Miss Octavia knit her brows thoughtfully, and did not for a moment speak. When her reply came it was characteristic. "I had other plans for you, Anthony."

Roden smiled involuntarily. "You have only to transfer them," he said. "All I ask is to meet Hester now and then at your house. Surely this could be managed? I have not the slightest reason to suppose that she looks upon me in any light but that of friendship pure and simple, but I mean to do my best to win her. You see, as matters stand my hands are tied, and a day or two ago I came to

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the conclusion that you might help me at least to continue the old friendship."

Miss Octavia smoothed her silken gown thoughtfully. "Tell me about her, how you came to know her," she said.

Roden grew fluent on the subject, and Miss Octavia marshalled her facts in her own practical way as he told her of the old days in London.

"They seem to have been a curiously divided family at the outset," she remarked; "but then the old family life, as I and my generation knew it, is no longer followed. The good patriarchal element seems to have vanished for ever. Now, what is the mystery there, Anthony?"

"I have not the remotest idea."

Miss Octavia sat very erect. "Then it is your business to find out," she said bluntly.

Roden raised his eyebrows. "Not for anything you could name," he said, with equal directness. "How in the world could I?"

Miss Octavia never relaxed a muscle. "If you are going to marry into the family—let me suppose"—as he uttered a word in protest—"that she will marry you—it is your bounden duty beforehand to ascertain the facts. There is a mystery of some kind, or why should these two, accustomed to society and luxury, live away from their kind and shun all who ever knew them?"

Roden flicked the ash from his cigar. "It has puzzled me a good deal, of course," he acknowledged; "but then I have come to the conclusion that if we did but know the facts of the case it would resolve itself into some worry, such as money reverses. You know, with all due regard to your sex, women do sometimes magnify a trifling grief into a tragedy."

Miss Octavia shook her head. She looked honestly troubled. "Some women—the little-minded ones, perhaps—those who cannot see the bright side of anything. But the women who creep away to bear their sorrows alone are the courageous ones, Anthony. Granted it may be a mistaken valiance, but to me it shows many things. I should like to meet Mrs. Percival."

"She must be a most unconscionable woman in some ways," said Roden; "and she never made much of Hester. There was another daughter, and she seems to have been the mother's idol."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know," replied Roden.

"And the father? Is Mrs. Percival a widow?"

"I have not the vestige of an idea. How could I know?"

Roden felt half inclined to resent these searching inquiries, until he looked up and met Miss Octavia's glance.

She leaned forward suddenly, and put her hand

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on his as it lay on the arm of his chair. There was the same motherly light in her eyes. "My dear," she said, almost solemnly, "hard as it may seem, perhaps it is better that the friendship should not be renewed. It would be all the harder afterwards. There is some tragedy in the house, or that poor child would not look as she does. It seems unjust that the sins of the fathers *should* be the cause of so much suffering, that in addition to 'dreeing our ain weird' we must dree those of other people." She sighed, speaking from bitter experience.

"I could help her to bear it," said Roden stubbornly; "she's so young and so"—

His fingers went out and tightened on a fold of Miss Octavia's gown. "Don't you think she looks frightfully fragile?" He spoke as if reluctant to put his fear into words.

"She does not appear to be very robust," said Miss Octavia reluctantly.

Roden gave a short laugh and stood up suddenly. "She looks as if a harsh wind might blow her away," he said, "as if she had not half enough to eat, as if she wanted care and cherishing, and—and"—he turned and fingered one of the bronzes on the mantelshelf—"some brightness in her life. If you had only seen her before, your heart would ache as mine does."

"My poor boy,"—Miss Octavia's voice was very gentle,—"sit down and let us talk it over. We will put our heads together and do what we can. But I wish we knew what the mystery is. There are so many risks."

"It would make no difference to me," said Roden. "I stand quite alone, without a soul to care what I do with my life."

"No, no," interposed Miss Octavia quickly; "that is true of no one. Not one of us, however alone he may seem, can live just for himself; he is bound to affect others, if not now, then in the generations to come. And you know"—she glanced round the beautiful old room—"you know the motto, *Noblesse oblige*."

Roden's face changed. "We consider our possible descendants far too much," he said unreasonably, taking up the cigar which had long ago died out. Then, before she could speak, he went on as if half ashamed: "I feel convinced that the Percivals owe their present position in some way to the head of the house; they were very well off when I knew Hester, and Clementina's repetition of her mother's remark, 'The disgrace of it all,' might point to anything or nothing. In the eyes of Mrs. Feilding bankruptcy would be on a par with original sin."

"That may be so," said Miss Octavia. "It is,

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of course, as vague as the monetary views of one's friends. Ideas of poverty and riches are a very uncertain quantity. And yet"—

"Will you help me to see her now and then?" asked Roden. "Set your woman's wit to work. If I cannot, then Netherlands must be left to its own devices once again, and I'll go abroad. Can you imagine what it is to be almost next door and yet so entirely apart? I never before realised the truth of the sentimental ditty, 'So near and yet so far.' Think what it might mean, what Netherlands might be, if—she cared. And how am I to know unless I can see her sometimes?"

Miss Octavia's face softened. "Trust me to do what I can," she said; "but, remember, in a matter she considers right, that girl will beat down our united efforts, will trample down her own desires for the sake of duty, or I am no judge of physiognomy.

CHAPTER IX

HESTER SEES THE WORLD AGAIN

ON the morning after the controversy regarding her, Hester paid her customary visit to her mother's room. She found her sitting up in bed glancing towards the door. Her eyes fell on Hester's empty hands.

"The letters! Are there no letters?" she asked, with a look of almost feverish expectancy in her eyes. Her hands were straying restlessly over the eider-down, and a consuming anxiety seemed to have taken possession of her.

"The post is late this morning," said Hester; "are you expecting something of importance, mother?"

"Yes, of great importance; it should have come this morning without fail."

Hester lingered for a moment. There were letters littered over the eider-down, blue envelopes with a sheaf of papers tied together with a narrow pink tape. A streak of sunlight crept in through the window and fell aslant Mrs. Percival's eyes. She

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put up a thin hand to shield them. "Pull down the blind, Hester," she said.

And Hester excluded the one ray of brightness from the room. Then she moved towards the door. It was always a grief to her that she felt tongue-tied before her mother, that the merest stranger and she seemed to have more in common.

Drusilla it was who always helped her mistress in her toilette, and dressed the hair now lying in thick strands on her shoulders—hair which, despite its snowiness, looked in its soft curling masses the hair of a young woman.

At the door Hester turned, and the expression on her mother's face touched her in spite of the bitterness that lay at her heart. "I will go and watch for the letters," she said; "the postman is sometimes very slow on his rounds."

She ran downstairs and, bareheaded, into the garden. Drusilla had set open the front door wide, and the keen October air filled the hall. Hester loved to get out of the house, even if it were only into the high-walled garden, and now she lifted up her face to let the breeze play over it. Jakes was industriously burying a bone in that one particular corner where he fondly imagined Drusilla's stern eye never penetrated. He raked the earth over it hastily, and, as Hester approached, sat over the spot with a would-be unconscious expression.

"What would Drusilla say?" asked Hester, pointing a finger at the scattered earth; "two promising bulbs ruined for the sake of one mutton-bone."

Jakes looked desperately ashamed of himself. He wriggled up to his mistress as if to say, "What's the need to tell everything?" and watched in a state of frantic anxiety while she brushed the scattered earth from the path.

"There can be no letters this morning," thought Hester, sitting down on the handles of the wheelbarrow. "I wonder"— She placed her elbows on her knees and her chin upon her palm, and looked into the distance. There was a sharp touch in the air which, combined with the sunshine, sent the blood racing through her veins.

"I *must* this morning," she said. "We'll have a walk, Jakes. Drusilla shall give us some sandwiches, and we'll have a good long tramp." She stretched her arms out wide as she spoke. "I want to get away miles and miles."

Jakes, who was sniffing at his buried joy, put up his head and gave a short bark. The next moment the bell rang. It was the postman's summons at last, and Hester ran to the gate.

"Big post this morning, miss," said the man civilly; "a bit late."

"A little," said Hester, her eyes fixed upon the

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letters, of which there were several. "I suppose the train was late? Thank you."

The gate clanged, and the man, with his ponderous step, went along the road. Uppermost was a large square envelope, heavily sealed—an envelope bearing a curious handwriting, the letters looking as if painted. It was a handwriting Hester had often seen before; lately it had come very frequently, and, though she deliberately shut her eyes to many things which concerned her mother, she could not help remarking that the former was in her most restless frame of mind after receiving these letters.

She took them into the house, meeting Drusilla coming downstairs. Her eyes at once lighted upon the letters with an air of relief.

"They've come, after all," she said; "I thought the bell rang, though I said nothing. Give them to me, Miss Hester."

For one moment Hester hesitated. Fond as she was of Drusilla, the old woman's assumption of authority sometimes rankled, she seemed so entirely in Mrs. Percival's confidence. How much Drusilla knew Hester was too proud to ask. She put the letters into the old woman's hand and turned away, going to the kitchen to cut some sandwiches.

The next moment Drusilla came downstairs. "The mistress wants you quickly, Miss Hester."

Short a time as had elapsed, before Hester was half-way upstairs she heard the bell which stood beside her mother's bed rung impatiently. Mrs. Percival was sitting up in bed writing a letter rapidly in pencil. She glanced up, two crimson patches on her cheeks accentuating the darkness of her eyes.

"Did not Drusilla tell you I asked for you?" she said irritably, running her finger down a time-table as she spoke. "I want you to go to London by the 11.10, Hester. You will just catch it, I imagine. There is an important letter that I must send, and the post will be too late."

"This morning?" asked Hester, in bewilderment. Never had such a thing happened before.

"You must get ready at once, or you will miss the train," said Mrs. Percival. "Can you not hurry, Hester, instead of standing there? It will take you half an hour to walk to the station. Go and get ready, and then I will give you directions."

Hester had never seen her mother stirred into such action. The pencil was moving rapidly over the paper as Hester left the room, but the letter was folded and sealed, the directions written, and Hester's expenses on the table beside the bed when she returned dressed in her outdoor garb.

Drusilla was lying in wait in the hall for her with a sandwich and a glass of milk.

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"I can't stay," said Hester; "the sandwich I can eat in the train."

As usual it resulted in Drusilla getting her own way. She waited until the glass of milk was finished, and then smoothed down Hester's coat. "I don't like to see you going alone, dearie; but you know London, don't you?"

Hester glanced at the address. "I know where this place is," she said; "not far from the Hay-market. I don't know the actual street; but I can easily find it."

Drusilla nodded. "I shall be anxious until I see you safe back," she said.

Hester kissed the wrinkled cheek, and looked up the staircase. "That is more than mother said," she remarked. "Good-bye, Drusilla; I believe I shall enjoy a sight of the world again."

The gate clanged and she was gone. Drusilla shook her head. "Mysteries I never could hold with," she said to herself; "half of them's not needful. The child ought to know. I shouldn't wonder if what she imagines isn't a deal worse than the truth. It often is."

Hester walked swiftly along the road, the letter and her little purse clasped in her hand. As she said, she was glad to be having a look at the world again; and when Roden came along the road towards her, her eyes were shining and she had

a bright colour in her face. She was, to his surprise, unfeignedly glad to see him.

"I can hardly stop a minute," she said, her hand for a moment in his: "I'm positively going to London."

"Not alone?"

"Of course," said Hester, smiling. "Did you think I wanted a chaperon? Why, it's only half an hour's run."

Roden did not smile. "I think you ought to have someone with you," he said, and at that moment Hester dropped the letter at his feet. As he raised it the address presented itself distinctly.

"You are not going there alone?" he asked quickly. "Forgive me, but I could not help seeing the address."

"It does not matter," said Hester, still gay, her colour deepening at his tone. "It is not far from the Haymarket. I seem to have seen the name before."

"He is a very celebrated dealer in curios," said Roden quietly, "well known, and reputed to have the most wonderful collection. I have seen his shop; it is in a dingy little back street containing a medley of nationalities."

They were walking along together towards the station. Roden suddenly threw back his head in a way that Hester remembered as curiously familiar.

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It used to mean that he had formed a sudden resolve, and she looked at him inquiringly, her head a little on one side. This morning she was the Hester of two years ago, the same, yet with a something added that gave the impression of mingled youth and womanliness, which was very attractive. He broke into a smile, and she smiled back involuntarily.

"I wonder what you are making up your mind to do?" she said. "You really are *exactly* the same. Do you know, I feel this morning as if something had dropped away from me. For a long time I have felt about the age of my great-grandmother."

"I am going to buy your ticket, at all events," he said, blessing the happy chance which had allowed them to meet. "You don't mind?"

"I'm glad," said Hester candidly. "Don't you remember how I hated doing that kind of thing for myself? Here's my purse"—she thrust the thin little leather receptacle into his hand—"third-class return, mind."

They entered the station, and she stood beside him at the booking office, so that he had no means of equivocating. But she heard him demand two tickets.

"One," interposed Hester hastily, and the booking clerk hesitated.

"*Two third returns*," repeated Roden stubbornly, and the clerk thrust them towards him.

The train came in at that moment. There was no time for recriminations. He hurried Hester towards an empty carriage, and jumped in after her. Hester frowned at him with as much dignity as her breathlessness would allow.

Roden leaned forward. " *That's* what I made up my mind to do," he said.

" I might have known that it was something I did not approve of," still endeavouring to be majestic ; " you used to do things of that sort, if you remember."

" It is my way," said Roden gravely. And Hester laughed, a pretty ringing laugh. Then she checked herself and looked absolutely ashamed.

" It is so extraordinary to hear the sound of my own laugh," she said, her lips quivering. " Do you know, I have *quite* got out of the way of laughing ? "

Something in her expression hurt her hearer indescribably. " Poor little girl," he said in a low tone ; " it *is* too bad."

Hester looked out of the window ; she even dusted a tiny patch of the pane with her handkerchief. But her eyes were clouded, and he knew it. She had always a proud little way of hiding grief. He remembered it so well.

An intense longing overcame him to tell her all he felt, but he checked himself. He would not take advantage of the present opportunity. Then she

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turned round to ask him a question, the passing emotion over.

“Where are you going to have lunch?” he asked suddenly, when they had talked over past events.

“I shall have tea somewhere, I think,” said Hester vaguely, unconsciously compressing her purse in her hand. Again Roden noted its meagre outlines, and for the first time the thinness of her coat.

“Let us lunch together, just for the sake of old times,” he urged.

“No,” said Hester; “it would not do at all.”

“Why not?”

Hester’s eyes were fixed on a worn place in her glove.

“Is it because I am in country get-up instead of the regulation frock-coat and topper?”

Hester broke into an uncertain little smile as she surveyed his irreproachable tweeds, and then looked down at her own skirt.

“You look nice enough for *anything*,” she declared, in her old frank way; “but do you think it would be right?”

“Absolutely.”

Hester’s face brightened. “It would be fun, at anyrate,” she said; “but I’m afraid you won’t care for the place I shall go to. It was good of you even to come third class.”

Roden gave one of his rare laughs. “You don’t

for a moment imagine *you* are going to choose the restaurant?" he said. "Am I having lunch with you, pray, or you with me?"

"How shall we manage?" asked Hester.

"I'll wait for you somewhere near," he said. "Don't bother yourself; I'll do the planning."

Outside the station they took a cab to the Hay-market, where they dismissed the man. A short walk brought them in sight of the street where the curio shop was situated.

"That one on the right-hand side, far up," said Roden.

"Not that dingy window?" asked Hester, in astonishment. She was nearly there, Roden watching her, when suddenly she turned, and came back swiftly towards him. Her face flushed as she reached him, and with a little well-remembered gesture she tucked her hand for an instant within his arm.

"You are so good to me," she said, in a low tone that quivered a little, "and you can't imagine how glad I am to feel that you are out here waiting for me."

Before he could say a word she was gone again, and he saw her turn the handle of the curiosity shop door.

She went in slowly, standing for a moment amid a strange medley of curios, quaint bronzes, hideous

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idols in brown carved wood, tall jars of blue china, and Oriental bowls. A blurred looking-glass in an old-world frame gave back her own reflection dimly.

The place was dark, and had a ghostly look. Hester wished she had asked Roden to come with her, and stood doubtfully glancing up the staircase, when a person standing at the far end of the premises came slowly towards her.

Hester felt a sudden sense of relief. The man before her was evidently a foreigner. He bowed with all the grace of one, and from his olive skin, dark eyes, and snow-white hair Hester put him down as an Italian. He glanced inquiringly at her and then at the letter in her hand. "For me?" he asked.

Hester looked searchingly back at him. "I am Hester Percival," she said; "my mother sends you this," holding the letter out that he might read the address.

He bowed and took it from her hand. "For me. You come to ask about your father?"

CHAPTER X

A DEALER IN CURIOS

FOR a moment Hester hesitated, so taken aback by the unexpectedness of the question as to be incapable of uttering a word.

The Italian examined the letter, then his dark eyes returned to Hester's face. His features softened as he looked.

Hester recovered herself readily. "*Can you tell me about my father?*" she asked. "I shall be so glad to hear something—anything—of him."

The Italian's face changed as he realised his slip of the tongue. He bowed, then shrugged his shoulders imperceptibly.

"Perhaps it would be better after all if I allowed the news to be communicated through Mrs. Percival," he said, with an evident evasion to which Hester was growing accustomed. To have facts withheld from her appeared to be her portion, and she could hardly bring herself to plead with an entire stranger about her own family affairs. She drew up her head a little, and said nothing for a moment. One



"Can you tell me about my father?"

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of the great carved idols seemed to be grinning at her ironically, and the air of the place, with its suggestion of Eastern spices and the pungency that always hangs around articles packed abroad, made her head swim. The two figures reflected in the dim old mirror looked unreal and ghostly, and the surroundings seemed to melt away into vistas of grinning monstrosities. She grew deadly pale, caught at the back of a high carved chair, and sat down.

"You are fatigued," said the Italian. "There is little air; is it not so? While I write my answer will you do me the honour to come into my office? It is as airy as this terrible climate will allow, and bright, while here all is dark and what you call fusty."

Hester rose reluctantly. "Is it necessary that I should wait for the answer?" she asked. "Can you not post it to my mother?"

She felt a sudden wild longing to have sight and sound once more of Roden's kind, familiar presence; to get into the noise and air of the streets. Here all seemed muffled and dead with the dust of ages.

The Italian bowed. "It is very necessary that you should take the answer," he said. "I will write it with all possible speed, believe me."

He led the way through a narrow avenue of

curios which, though Hester did not realise the fact, were worth a fortune. Left apparently unguarded, there were keen eyes on the watch, and the opening of the door caused an electric bell to ring in warning. Under that one roof were gathered together articles rich and rare from nearly every quarter of the globe, and in other circumstances Hester would have fully appreciated the pictures, the tapestries, the soft glowing lengths of brocade, the shimmering light which shone, even in those dim surroundings, from marvellously shaped and translucent bits of Venetian glass.

But Hester's heart was sore within her. Until this moment she had never fully realised how entirely she was of her family apart. She felt as much alone as though she had no people belonging to her, no home, no parents. Again the thought of Roden waiting for her brought a tinge of colour back to her face and courage to her heart. She had not the least disinclination to follow her guide; her one desire was to get the interview over. The opening of a door ushered her into another world. What the Italian had designated his office was a beautiful room, severely artistic in colouring and arrangement, well carpeted, and having a bright fire and open windows, which let in a stifled roar from the outside world, and the nearer jingle, now and again, of hansom-cab bells. There were some

growing plants in the windows, a vase or two of flowers on the high mantelshelf, and at the far end of a room beyond Hester could catch a glimpse of a girl typist busy at her machine. The distant click, click, came now and again, and the pleasant, commonplace, alert little figure acted like a tonic on Hester, bringing her back to the present with indescribable speed. She glanced over one of the illustrated papers, though afterwards no item of the details it contained came back to her mind, while the Italian, seated at his writing-table, wrote in what seemed a laborious fashion, pausing every now and again to glance meditatively in Hester's direction.

He closed and sealed the letter with the same deliberation and gravity, then, walking over to the lounge with it in his hand, looked down at Hester. His expression was very kind. "You are—I see it now that the light is better—very like your father."

Hester looked up at him, her face eloquent with appeal. "You know my father?" she asked. "I have not seen him for a long time—years—and he was always very good and kind to me."

"He was"—the Italian checked himself, and his features changed—"is a very kind-hearted man; my best friend; he did much for me. I had"—Again he hesitated. "Ah, these verbs of yours—I have good reason to love him much."

Hester's face glowed. She involuntarily clasped her hands. "Oh, how glad I am to meet someone who knows and loves him!" she exclaimed. "I was sure he was good and kind, yet"—she paused, and some of the flush and illumination faded from her eyes—"yet, you know there is nobody to tell me a word about him. I am too old to be kept in ignorance."

Her listener nodded in a quaint, emphatic way peculiar to him. He was studying Hester's face. "It is a pity," he said.

She suddenly rose and faced him. "You have my mother's confidence," she said, "my father's friendship; do you not agree that they have no right to withhold them from me? If children have a duty towards their parents, have they none to the children?"

He nodded again. "I think you are right in what you say. You look a mere child, yet you have character, what you call heart, sympathy; is it not so?"

Hester shook her head, and looked into the fire. "Sympathy? Sometimes I think there is not a spark of it left in my nature," she said, forgetting for a moment that she spoke to a stranger. "How can one be sympathetic when one knows nothing—except, of course, that my father is—has—has had many money troubles?" She looked up at the Italian.

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"Ah, yes," he said vaguely; "many money troubles, it is true."

Hester hesitated a moment, and then put her hand out for the letter. "Then you do not mean to tell me more about my father?" she asked. "Not how he is? You have seen him lately?"

"Quite lately." The speaker, who was a tall man, glanced over Hester's head. "He was—well."

Hester half smiled, and then sighed a little impatiently. "You said that so oddly," she exclaimed, "or perhaps it was my imagination. You won't tell me more?"

"I will tell you this," said the Italian, suddenly breaking bounds, his eyes flashing and his fingers gesticulating excitedly. "He was my best friend, helping me when ruin—ah, *what* ruin!—stared me in the face; lending me money, too, when I had no security to give him—not a stroke of the pen would he take; and, hardest of all, how little could *I* do when *his* time came."

He turned aside for a moment and walked to the window with his swift un-English step. Then he turned as swiftly and took Hester's hands in his own "Command me if at any time you want a friend," he said. "For you or for your mother I would do much."

"I will remember," said Hester; "and will you, when you see him again, give him my love, and ask

if I may see him some day soon? He must be very lonely"—there were tears in her eyes—"perhaps he needs me more than my mother does."

"That is not probable," said the Italian; "she, ah, she is a fine character."

Hester took the letter and glanced at the address. "You write to my mother often," she remarked.

"Frequently," he replied; "there is the necessity. Perhaps now there will be less occasion."

Hester, frankly curious, looked up quickly. "I wonder why," she said, and then held out her hand. "Thank you for telling me even so much; perhaps one day I may know everything."

He bowed. "Perhaps." Then as he held the door open for her to pass out, "Pray let me offer you a little refreshment after your journey. How very thoughtless of me."

"No, thank you," said Hester, glancing at the clock on the wall; "I am very late already. Good-bye."

She hurried down the narrow street to where Roden was anxiously awaiting her. His watch was in his hand as she reached him.

"Five minutes more and I meant to look you up," he exclaimed, and, truth to tell, he had grown terribly apprehensive about her. "You had a long interview. No, I'm not going to ask you anything about it, not one word, unless you tell me I may. You look quite pale and tired."

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"So tired," said Hester, passing her hand across her eyes as they emerged into the sunshine and the busy crowds. "Would you mind if we went somewhere *very* quiet for a little time? Out of the racket and noise. I thought I should enjoy it; I used, but I suppose I've got out of the way of enjoying things really."

Her wan little face again gave Roden that pang of dread. She looked very fragile. "You want something to eat," he said, glancing down at her. "Come along at once."

"No, no; not for a few minutes. Can't we go where it's quiet? The Park isn't far from here. Let's go, if you don't mind waiting a little longer."

A walk of a few moments brought them to St. James's Park, and there, as they paced up and down the quiet paths, Hester found breathing space. "How delicious the air is," she said, after a momentary silence; "how good after that curio shop."

Roden said nothing. They sat down on a couple of chairs near the water, and in the peace and freshness Hester regained her balance. She could have had no companionship more suited to her mood than Roden's. He showed no curiosity, asked no questions, refrained even from small talk, and, by his very silence, expressed a comprehension and sympathy far beyond words. "She shall feel that with me she is safe from questioning," he thought, as

he glanced unnoticed at the small, tense face. Hester, her hands clasped in her lap, was looking straight before her, absorbed in her own thoughts. Then suddenly she sat erect and turned to her companion.

"You knew my father?" she asked. "Didn't you meet him at the Feildings?"

"Once," said Roden, "years ago."

"How did he strike you?" asked Hester. "Perhaps you don't remember him well enough?"

"I remember him as very genial-looking, and—and all that," remarked Roden, endeavouring to send his thoughts back across the years in order to please her; "uncommonly good-looking, too."

Hester nodded. "He—he was just like any other people you have ever met?" she asked.

"Absolutely, only better than some." Roden was puzzled at her tone. "He seemed very much liked, I remember, that evening, and you basely deserted me for him."

"I saw so little of him," said Hester. "Hardly anything. I remember liking him very much." The incongruity of the remark, as applied to a father, struck her, and she glanced up at her listener, but his face had not moved a muscle. Then she sighed impatiently. "It all seems so impossible to understand."

"Well, give it up for the present," said Roden cheerfully; "it's ages since you had anything to eat,

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and as for me, the memory of an early breakfast has long faded into the mists of the past. Come along; you will be better for it, even if you think you don't want anything."

As he had imagined, the allusion to his own need for refreshment aroused Hester to a sense of her remissness. She glanced up at him. "Would you mind going to a very ordinary place?" she asked.

"Not one of those tea-shop places?"

"Well, somewhere very quiet," said Hester. "You're all right, but my frock, my gloves"—

"What's the matter with them? They're delightfully becoming."

But Hester shook her head pensively. "You might think so, but other people wouldn't," she remarked, with a sigh. "I'm wofully shabby, there can't be two opinions about it, and I do hate worn gloves. Anyhow, you will let it be somewhere *very* quiet."

"I know the very place," said Roden, "nothing grand, no music, which, by the way, seems out of place at meal time; nothing fine except the cooking, which is just what you will like."

CHAPTER XI

CLEMENTINA AGAIN

THROUGH the busy thoroughfares they passed. The streets were full of shoppers; crowds thronged the pavements and gathered round the windows. Roden, intent on reaching the little foreign café where he had once been a frequent visitor, suddenly felt a light touch on his arm. Looking down, he saw Hester's face full of a half-apologetic fun.

"*Would* you mind waiting for just one minute while I look into that shop window?" she asked. "The frocks are so lovely, and—and it's such ages—and, of course, men simply *hate* looking in shop windows."

"I'm one of the exceptions," said Roden, rather manfully, considering that it meant a still further delay to his much-needed luncheon. "Which one do you mean? This?"

Side by side they surveyed the dainty frocks. Hester unconsciously clasped her hands. "How pretty they are!" she said, in a low tone. "Just look at that blue."

"The pink's even prettier. And it's like one you had before I went away. Don't you remember?" said Roden critically. "It would suit you beautifully."

"*Wouldn't* it!" exclaimed Hester naively; then she sighed. "It's more than two years since I had a new frock—think of it!"

Roden looked down at her, half smiling, half irritated at his inability to say, "All that I have give I thee," and was indeed meditating some speech for which the time had not yet arrived when a wholly unexpected interruption came from behind them.

"It is you; I thought it was. I asked John to make quite certain, and he said he thought it *was* the gentleman that liked his muffins well buttered. Rather a funny way of putting it, but John has *such* a good memory."

Roden turned to find his hand rapturously held by Clementina. Before he could say a word she had caught sight of his companion, and relinquished her hold of him to throw her arms with an added fervour round Hester. "Oh, Hester, it *can't* be you, really it *can't*!"

Hester laughed and patted Clementina's arm. "It *really* is," she said. "Why, how you've grown, Clem. I should hardly have known you, I think."

"Oh yes, you would," said Clementina triumph-

antly, with difficulty restraining an inclination to execute a war-dance on the pavement. "My face must be the same; it's only my legs that will keep on getting longer. Mother's quite annoyed with me about it, just as if I could help it."

"You're going to be taller than your mother," said Hester. Then she glanced round apprehensively. "How is it that you are alone?"

"I'm just waiting about for father," said Clementina. "He's gone in to see a lawyer about something over there, and he told me I could wait for him here. He's gone up a little side street somewhere. He always stays ages, and I got out of the carriage to look at the shops. *Isn't* it lucky I saw you both?"

Much to Hester's relief, Clementina expressed no astonishment at meeting them together. Roden consulted his watch. Time was passing. "I'm afraid we can't stay any longer," he said; "there's such a lot to do."

"What kind of things?" demanded Clementina, in her spoilt way. "Can't I come too? Or you go, and let Hester come for a drive with me, and we can buy chocolates and have some ices."

"*Ices!*" said Roden, with an audible shudder; "this is no weather for ices."

"It's always weather for ices, isn't it, Hester?" She was clinging to Hester's arm as if afraid the

latter might vanish into thin air, noticing and feeling sorry in her childish fashion that Hester should be so changed and shabby in her attire. "It's the same face," Clementina said sagely to herself; "her hair's even fluffier, and her eyes bigger and more beautiful, and, after all, what do clothes matter?" But she felt quite a pang at the sight of Hester's little rubbed gloves.

Hester in her turn looked at Roden. "Couldn't she come too?" her eyes said, and he magnanimously agreed to forego the *tête-à-tête* luncheon.

"We're going to have lunch first," he said. "Do you think you could come too?"

Clementina clasped her hands in rapture, her face grew rosy red. "Oh, *may* I?" she exclaimed incoherently. "Will you? May I? Oh, what fun!"

"But how can you?" asked Hester. "Your father may be back any minute."

"I shall tell John," said Clementina, shaking back her hair liked an untamed colt, radiantly happy, with one hand on Roden's arm and the other holding Hester's. "It was lucky I saw you when I did, because father had only been gone five minutes, and he stays ages and ages—long enough for three lunches when he goes to the lawyer's. They're ever such friends."

She suddenly broke off, as if struck by an idea.

She glanced for a moment into her little hanging purse, and then in the direction of the carriage, and John waiting on the pavement. "I must tell John for fear father comes before I get back," she said. "What fun if *he* has to wait instead of me. I shan't be more than one minute."

She flew along the pavement towards John, said a few words to him, and then with a nod in their direction ran into a shop. She flew up to the counter and demanded two pairs of gloves, a white and a grey pair. Size? Well, she thought sixes; yes, she was quite sure Hester took sixes. Then just as the young person behind the counter was wrapping them up into a neat parcel, Clementina stayed her hand, racked by a terrible doubt. "Oh, would you mind telling me," she exclaimed, "whether people's hands get bigger as they get older?"

"Of course they do," said the attendant, smiling a little at Clementina's anxious expression. "Yours must be bigger now than when you were a baby."

Clementina frowned. She feared the superior person behind the counter was laughing at her. "Of course, I know all that," she said, with a wave of her hand, as if to dismiss a trivial suggestion; "but when people are just grown up do they alter?"

"Very seldom," said the attendant, "unless, of course, they become very stout."

Clementina's face cleared; she descended from her

perch of dignity. "Then that's all right," she said. "Hes—this lady is a good deal thinner. Thank you very much. Good-morning."

Clementina only just saved the situation. Roden was beginning to look very impatient, and Hester, who knew she ought to be getting back, looked anxious too.

On the whole, the meeting with Clementina had its disadvantageous side; but the next moment she was hastening towards them with such a radiant face that they forgave her there and then.

"Now I'm ready," she said. "I told John to tell the coachman to drive round to where father is and say he was not to hurry, that I had gone out to lunch with you." She was busy fumbling with her small parcel as she spoke, trying to push it into the pocket of her coat.

"Give it to me," said Roden; "I'll put it into my pocket. Don't let me take it away with me, though."

"But I"—began Clementina, managing to get the parcel into her pocket, her face dimpling all over in a delightful way—"it's a secret; only don't ask any more questions."

"I haven't asked one," remarked Roden. "Here we are *at last!*"

They were late, and the little foreign *café* was nearly deserted. It was so dainty and fresh that Clementina and Hester were equally delighted with

it. While Roden consulted the bill of fare, Hester caught sight of her own face in the mirror opposite, and hardly recognised herself. "It is my one red-letter day," she said to herself. "After all, it was accident, and not my choosing, and I will enjoy just these few hours. It will be easier to go back to the other kind of life."

Then in the mirror too, as she gravely argued with herself, she caught sight of Roden's dark face smiling, and of Clementina's on her left hand.

"I believe you'd quite forgotten we were here," said Clementina.

But Roden understood. He was beginning to watch for and to know every expression that came and went on Hester's face, and he comprehended now all that her look meant. Clementina made the meal a gay one. She insisted on choosing all the things of which she had never even heard, and quite regardless of the fact that her early lunch had been a good if plain one. It was over the ices, however, that she waxed confidential.

"Hester," she remarked suddenly, "when you get married may I be your *chief* bridesmaid? Not just the ordinary kind, you know."

There was a silence that might be felt. Outside a barrel organ struck up "The Wearin' o' the Green," and in the room beyond a careless waiter dropped his salver with a crash. Glancing up quickly to laugh

at Clementina's remark, the expression in Roden's eyes caused a sudden tremor to pass through Hester. For the first time she understood the meaning of her gladness and contentment. He leaned across to her unseen by Clementina. "Say *yes*," he said, in a low tone.

But Hester would not meet his glance again. She shook her head silently, and Clementina took it in the light of a refusal. She laid down her spoon. "Of course, if there's anyone else you'd rather have," she remarked, in an offended tone, "I'll give up being *chief*; but I'm your only cousin, Hester, and I've always meant you to be mine if I got married first."

It was too much. Even Clementina joined in the laugh against herself, though her remark had been made in all seriousness. "I don't see a bit what there is to laugh at," she said. "You will promise, won't you?"

Hester left half her ice untasted, and began to put on her gloves hurriedly. "I am never likely to want any bridesmaids," she said, rubbing the little worn place into a hole in her intentness, "so what would be the use of promising?"

"That's what everyone pretends," remarked Clementina, quite unabashed, and appealing to Roden. "Now, isn't it silly? Of course everybody *expects* to get married. Don't you suppose Hester will?"

"I should think it more than probable." Roden,

out of regard for Hester's feelings, suppressed a smile. "But now we must go, or the train will leave us in the lurch."

"How soon shall I see you again?" asked Clementina. "Wasn't it funny our all meeting? Did you and Hester meet by accident?"

"Quite by accident," said Roden, and with truth. "Now we must really go. Your father will be sending the police in search of you, Clementina. By the way, do you like chocolates? Wait here."

As he left the room and went to the outer shop, Clementina fingered her little parcel of gloves, and hesitated. She even turned her eyes away from Hester's fingers lest she might seem to be drawing comparisons as she began to put on her own dainty little suede gloves. She said nothing, and the next moment Roden returned with a gaily-beribboned box of chocolates which he thrust under Clementina's arm. Hester had moved towards the exit, and Clementina seized her opportunity with a strategy which might have done credit to a master mind. Giving a meaning look and a nod in Hester's direction, she slipped the little rustling parcel from her own pocket to Roden's, and before he could utter a word had run forward and put her arm through Hester's. She was very silent until they reached the rendezvous and saw John waiting patiently in the distance. Then, in spite of the

publicity, she clung to Hester for a moment, her eyes full of tears. "Can't you let me have your address, Hester? Just to write sometimes. It has been so lovely to see you again, and somehow"—her little face eloquent with feeling—"you seem nicer and prettier, and, somehow, *dearer* even than you used to be."

Hester too forgot her surroundings, and kissed the child in the midst of the throng. "No, dear," she said. "Some day I may give you my address, not now. Perhaps you ought not to have had lunch with me. If—if you think your mother and father would like it, give them my love. You know I'm very fond of them. Good-bye, dear little Clem. We have had a nice time together."

Clementina struggled with a swelling in her throat, and turned to shake hands with Roden. "It's been a lovely time," she said, "and th—thank you for the chocolates."

The next moment she had run off in John's direction, and they lost sight of her.

"I hope we shall not lose the train," said Hester anxiously, as they neared the station; "there are so few."

Roden glanced at his watch. "We shall just do it," he said. "Why they trouble to have a station at Netherlands, when the trains that stop there are so sparingly doled out, passes my comprehension."

Here we are with five seconds to spare, and no tickets to worry about."

They did not talk much on the way, and then only of trivial subjects. Hester began to suffer a reaction; the chill atmosphere of home was once more enveloping her. She half blamed herself for having given way to such enjoyment. The thin paper of the foreign envelope crackled in her coat pocket at every movement, as if to remind her of the vague shadow which surrounded her household. They were out of the train and near the gate of home before Roden remembered the little parcel entrusted to him by Clementina. They stood in the road to open it.

"Gloves," said Hester; "and she never said a word to me about my shabby ones. What a dear little thing she is."

She smoothed the grey and the white fingers meditatively, her thoughts busy with Clementina.

"And here is something else," said Roden, producing a parcel from under his arm, "just a reminder of the old times. But, do you know, Hester, they had not a single box with *La France* roses or pink ribbon?"

"This is *quite* as pretty," said Hester. "Thank you for my happy day. It will make up for a year of dull moments."

"Why do you never go to see Miss Octavia?"

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asked Roden, as they paused at the gate. "It would be a real kindness."

"I wish I could go"—Hester spoke irresolutely—"but"—

"There is surely no reason why you should not," exclaimed Roden. "She is everything that is delightful."

"I am quite sure of that."

"Have you asked Mrs. Percival yet?"

Hester shook her head.

"You will?"

"I shall only get a refusal," said Hester.

"Try," he said. "Promise."

Somewhere in the distance Jakes barked, and towards them along the road whizzed a motor car. It was gone almost before they had time to notice that driving it was a girl, her head enveloped in a gauze veil.

"I promise," said Hester.

The gate clanged and closed between them.

CHAPTER XII

“CONSCIENCE MONEY”

ALL that afternoon Miss Octavia had been busy in the garden, after a morning spent in the pursuit of good works villagewards. The sunlight faded early, but the air was soft and balmy, with a suggestion of rain in the near future. She was taking off her gardening gloves preparatory to going in when a motor horn sounded in the distance. Miss Octavia sniffed audibly. She had a great objection to motors, considering that the peace and safety of the country roads had gone for ever since their advent. The horn came nearer, and presently she could hear the motor whirring along below the hedge. Then the sound ceased altogether, and, craning her neck to follow its evolutions, Miss Octavia realised with some astonishment that it had stopped at her own gate. In another moment the garden path was invaded by the motor's owner, who ran lightly up to where Miss Octavia stood, and without more ado kissed her lightly on either weather-beaten cheek.

“My dear Enid,” expostulated Miss Octavia,
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looking highly pleased, nevertheless, “what *are* you thinking of?”

“Here I am at last.” The speaker laughed as she said the words. “How delightful to see you again, even if you do, as usual, open up proceedings by snubbing me. You know you like it.”

Miss Octavia put her gloves into her gardening-apron pocket and looked up with a smile into the speaker’s face. Enid Drake was taller by several inches than Miss Octavia, slim too, and graceful under her heavy fur-lined motoring coat. Her face, framed in a mass of greyish gauze, was lovely with its dark eyes, oval curves, and softly brilliant colouring. Miss Octavia looked her visitor up and down appreciatively, and then gave one of her short, amused laughs. “Well, perhaps I do like it,” she remarked, leading the way along the path; “though let me tell you, no one but yourself has the temerity to salute me in that fashion. I forgive it on account of its rarity.”

Enid laughed, and tucked her hand under the speaker’s arm. “Do you know you always remind me of the crab-apples of one’s youth,” she remarked audaciously. “They were sure to be desperately acid, yet about them was a wonderful fascination possessed by no other apple then or since. There really is a kind of fearful joy about you, a good deal of bitter with the sweet.”

Miss Octavia laughed outright. "If that is a compliment, and I believe you mean it for one," she remarked, "it is the oddest that was ever bestowed upon me. Come in and have some tea; you feel cold even with those heavy wraps. I suppose," giving a glance towards the gate, which Enid had omitted to shut behind her, "it will not run away if left to its own devices, and deal death and destruction in the village? The children will just be coming out of school."

"Do you mean to say that no one around here has a motor?" exclaimed Enid; "that you have not?"

"*I!* Nothing would induce me to have one. And then I am not a millionaire."

"Wait until you have had a spin in mine," said Enid. Then seeing that Miss Octavia still appeared to labour under some doubt as to the stability of the motor without her gates, "The chauffeur will look after it. He is out there."

"That's well." Miss Octavia became her brisk self again. "He is to be trusted? No, my dear Enid, where motors are concerned all the spirit of my coach-driven ancestors rises within me in protest. I cannot find it possible to approve of the present mode of locomotion."

"You are so extraordinarily up-to-date in some ways," murmured Enid. "No, no, it slipped out; I

know you detest the expression—shall I say so extraordinarily progressive in everything but your vehicles?”

“Say what you like, so long as you don’t expect me to sing paens in praise of the motor,” said Miss Octavia, leading the way into her snugger. “We will have tea, and agree to differ.”

Enid threw off her heavy coat and drew near the fire, as if cold. She was always a chilly mortal, with an exotic air about her and that look which some women possess of never having done a day’s hard work in their lives. She untied the wreaths of grey gauze and emerged from her headgear looking lovelier than before. Perhaps because she had never been endowed with good looks even in her girlish days, a love of beauty amounted in Miss Octavia to something approaching a passion. She could rarely resist it in child, adult, or animal, in flower or scenery, and beneath her homely exterior dwelt an artistic nature with which few would have credited her. Indeed, she frequently had to school herself against showing favour to the prettiest babies in the village, agreeing that beauty is after all but skin deep, though not necessarily sharing the belief of many that a plain exterior must perforce enshrine the highest nature.

She surveyed her guest now with unalloyed satisfaction from the vantage point of the hearthrug.

Enid was kneeling before the fire holding her slender fingers to the blaze, her eyes fixed on the glowing, sputtering logs. She looked up and met Miss Octavia's glance, and for some incomprehensible reason she coloured and rose to her feet, putting her hands against the mantelshelf. Miss Octavia gently touched the flashing ring upon the third finger of the left hand. Enid coloured still more deeply, then she laughed a little, and checked herself with a sigh.

"What does *this* mean, pray?" Miss Octavia spoke with some curiosity, a sudden flash of interest showing in her gaze. "Surely not at last?"

"I came partly to tell you." Enid looked almost shamefaced, though not as a rule given to embarrassed moments. "I wanted to write, but somehow it is so much easier to say such things than to announce them in a letter. And, of course, I wanted you to know."

"Thank you." Miss Octavia's voice was gentle, and she touched the beautiful ring with her forefinger. "Who has gained your errant affections at last? Do I know him?"

"I imagine not, as he does not know you. You see, I've already mentioned you; he is far too good for me—oh, far too good."

Miss Octavia patted her on the shoulder. "My

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dear child, I am glad you are so fortunate in your own estimation ; it looks as if at last”—

Enid nodded. She was glancing away from Miss Octavia into the fire, and upon her face was an expression which puzzled her hostess. In spite of her words it was not a happy look, and to-day more than ever Miss Octavia was aware of a restlessness which seemed to underlie Enid's every look and action, despite her gaiety and charm. Now and then during their intercourse it had puzzled the older woman ; to-day, for some inexplicable reason, it made her heart ache. She asked no more questions, but bestirred herself to make tea, for the table, with cups and saucers and kettle, had been waiting on their arrival. Miss Octavia's tea equipage always included cups and saucers for unexpected guests. “Come and sit near me,” she said, when all the preparations were made.

Enid sat on a low chair near that of her hostess, and sipped her tea meditatively.

“What do your uncle and aunt think of it?” asked Miss Octavia, reverting to the topic which interested her so much. “Lament the idea of losing you, of course.”

“Very much, more than I could have imagined.” Enid put down her cup and saucer and propped her chin on her palms, looking with the same far-away, introspective glance into the flames. “They

have been so good about it; they are the dearest pair, in spite of their fads, and they have always combined to spoil me."

"Is it to be soon?"

"Oh no, not for ages."

"Why not? Is he badly off?"

"No, fairly well off—indeed, very well off," said Enid; "it is only that I do not mean to get married for ever so long."

"And he agrees?"

Enid sighed, and then smiled a little. "Reluctantly." She twisted her engagement ring round and round as she spoke, and the opals sent out many-coloured gleams in the firelight.

"Why opals?" queried Miss Octavia, watching them.

"I chose them. Surely you don't believe that old superstition?"

Miss Octavia ignored the remark—indeed, she did not seem to hear it. She was frowning to herself as she watched Enid's face with its air of intangible discontent. She touched the girl's wrist for a moment. "Does he care very much?"

Enid coloured, and for an instant a sudden glory touched her face. "Yes," she replied simply.

"And you? Oh, Enid, are you *quite* sure? Forgive me, but that mind of yours, so certain of a thing one day, so doubtful the next."

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Enid stood up and fingered the ornaments on the mantelshelf. “I am *quite* sure this time. Yes, I know you think me unstable as water. But”—she glanced away from Miss Octavia’s shrewd and kindly eyes—“but this time I know—and that”—a little sob rose in her throat, but she forced it back—“that is just why I believe I can never marry him.”

Enid humble-minded literally took Miss Octavia’s breath away. She was emotional, a creature of moods, inconsistencies, and lovable ways, a being who gained affection readily, and whom Miss Octavia had never credited with much depth of feeling, despite the real affection she felt for her.

She patted the hand with the ring and rose to get her knitting, and for the next few moments there was only the sound of the needles clicking to and fro as they weaved a pair of substantial socks for a village worthy afflicted with rheumatism. Enid brought her glance from the flames and looked at her watch. Her mood for confidences was as swift to pass as any other—grave, gay, lovable, she could be all and more in the space of an hour. “I must go,” she said; “but if you will have me I will come again soon, and when *he* visits us I will bring him, if I may.”

“Do,” said Miss Octavia.

Enid began to laugh. “Do you ever waste a

single moment?" she asked, touching the sock. "Is that for one of your protégés?"

"For a poor man crippled with rheumatism," said Miss Octavia, ignoring the first question. "He is still quite young, but absolutely dependent on others for everything. A sad case!"

Enid, in the act of putting on her coat, paused a moment, and then fumbling in the pocket, drew out a dainty gold chain-purse. "Let me give you something for him," she exclaimed; "do let me. And will you tell me of any cases you want help for? Oh, do." She threw down her hat impetuously, and put both her hands on Miss Octavia's shoulders. "I should think it a kindness, and I have so much—so *terribly* much"—with a little smile of appeal—"it will be conscience money."

"I will let you know," said Miss Octavia, but without enthusiasm; "thank you, not now."

She helped Enid with her hat and veil, buttoned her coat, kissed her, and stood at the gate to watch her away. Then, as Enid was about to mount to her place, she called her back. "Just a moment," she said, beckoning her within the gate; "you have positively not told me his name."

"Name?" asked Enid. Then, suddenly realising what was meant: "Oh, how stupid of me; his name is Gilbert Ainsley." The next moment, with a nod and a smile, she was gone.

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Miss Octavia returned to the house slowly, her brows knitted in thought. “Conscience money,” she repeated to herself; “*conscience* money! What in the world does the child mean? And Gilbert Ainsley! That must be Anthony’s friend. What a small world it is. She loves him, without a doubt, but she is not happy for all that. How extraordinary the present-day young woman is!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE CLINK OF GOLD

THE letter delivered, Hester retired to the fastness of her bedroom. Mrs. Percival had made no comment as to the length of her absence; indeed, Hester had only missed one train by her luncheon with Roden, and it was Jakes alone who had found her absence long and unaccountable. There was a little table beside her bed upon which she spread her trophies—the gloves and the chocolate box with its streamers of satin ribbon. It was, perhaps, a sign of approaching age which caused her to leave the serried rows of sweets untasted. She sat on the edge of the bed with Jakes beside her and looked at the pretty box, leaving Clementina's present temporarily neglected. Jakes, who loved chocolates, breathed hard, and put out an inquiring paw. The gloves interested him not at all. Hester sighed a little to herself. The pleasant unconscious comradeship had given place to another sensation, puzzling, but not entirely unattractive in its way.

A tap came to the door, and the next moment

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Drusilla entered the room. Her glance went quickly from Hester to the contents of the table. Hester did not move. Indeed, she was glad rather than otherwise that Drusilla should notice the gloves and chocolate box, for she wanted to talk of her day in town, and hoped that Drusilla would express interest and ask a few questions. Years had not robbed Drusilla of her inheritance as Mother Eve's daughter; and she made no pretence at indifference now. Something more than curiosity bestirred her to questionings, for there was a new animation about Hester's face which even contact with her mother had not dispersed.

Drusilla fixed her spectacles more firmly in place. "Gloves and chocolates," she said. "Did you buy those in London, Miss Hester?"

"Now, where in the world should I get sixpence to spend on such things?" exclaimed Hester, with good-humoured scorn, "much less shillings and shillings for those"—she waved her hand in the direction of the table. "Do you realise, you dear old thing, that the gloves are the best suede, and that the box of chocolates—well, doesn't it seem to you tolerably expensive?"

She slipped aside the satin fastenings and disclosed the rows of daintily decorated chocolates. There was even a tiny pair of silver tongs with which to extract them. Jakes sat up in his excite-

ment, supposing the feast about to begin, but Hester replaced the lid of the box, and he subsided with it. Again Drusilla gave a long glance at Hester's face. The latter began to smile. "Ask as many questions as you like," she said, "or, no—I'll tell you all about it from the very beginning. Sit down and listen. Or better still, we'll go down to the kitchen fire for fear of your bronchitis. It's cold up here."

With the little round kitchen table between them Hester told her story from the beginning, from that first evening when she had met Roden, and farther back still to her youthful days in London.

Drusilla knitted steadily. There was an eloquence in the speaker's face and speech which attracted her attention. She hardly raised her eyes from her needles; the fresh young voice with its altered tones revealed to her many things. All the events of the day were related, and Drusilla noted with inward approval Clementina's chaperonage at luncheon.

Hester ceased her tale and waited anxiously for comments. "You don't think it was wrong, do you?" she asked, sending an anxious glance across the table. "Perhaps you think it very ill-conditioned of me to have even enjoyed it?"

Drusilla was filled with contrition for her apparent want of interest. "No, no, my dear," she exclaimed, "it was natural enough. The young to the young;

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and I never held that you should give up everything. Since you met that lady in the road, I've been thinking how you might go and see her sometimes. Down in the village they can't say enough of her, and"—Drusilla dropped a stitch and made a pretence of taking it up again—"and, my dear, a time comes when we all want friends."

Her last remark went unnoticed. Hester's elbows were on the table; she leaned forward breathlessly. This was sympathy indeed. "Do you think I might go in there sometimes?" she exclaimed. "She was so *very* kind, and quite anxious to be friends. And you know, Drusilla, I imagine she felt dreadfully snubbed when she called. Do you think mother would ever let me?"

Drusilla shook her head doubtfully. She had often pondered the problem of Hester's loneliness. She knew that in all probability the life of Mrs. Percival might be a short one, and that she herself would not be enough to stand between Hester and the world. Indeed, she loved Hester deeply, and she had strongly disapproved of her present mode of existence, arguing at the outset with her mistress that it would be better for Hester to go into the world and take a situation of some kind, as governess or companion, rather than, perhaps, be left later penniless and with no experience in earning a livelihood. Hester little guessed how many anxious

hours she had cost Drusilla, or how often, when Mrs. Percival ailed more than usual, the problem of the future had faced Drusilla in the night watches. And now on the other side of the table it confronted her again in Hester's pleading eyes, and she resolved to seize the opportunity offered by the friendship of Miss Octavia. "Leave it to me, Miss Hester; but mind, I don't promise you anything. Hark! What was that?"

Hester sprang to her feet. "Perhaps I had better go in now," she said, feeling a greater reluctance than usual in facing her mother to-night.

"She called," said Drusilla, putting down her knitting; "was it for you or for me, Miss Hester?"

But Hester was half-way across the hall, and in the sitting-room an instant later. Mrs. Percival lay in her customary position, but much to Hester's surprise, her work was no longer in her fingers. She was lying upon the couch with closed eyes, her hands idly folded in her lap, the work laid neatly aside on the table.

Hester approached softly, thinking she slept. Mrs. Percival opened her eyes. "Drusilla—I want Drusilla," she exclaimed. "Please send her to me. She must help me to my room."

"Let me help you." Out of her own happiness Hester felt a rush of love and pity such as she had

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never experienced before. All the dormant feeling of resentment faded away as she glanced down at the weary face and pose. "Let me help you to-night, mother—do."

Greatly to her surprise, Mrs. Percival extended her hand. Hester, swayed by a sudden impulse, stooped and kissed the thin cheek. A spasm passed across her mother's face, and Hester waited, aghast at her own temerity. Then for the first time in all these months her mother's face softened. She held tightly to Hester's hand, and by its aid raised herself. "You may help me upstairs, if you will," she said, in her clear, unemotional tones. "But then I should like you to send Drusilla to me; she understands my ways."

"I should like to understand them too, mother, if you would let me."

Mrs. Percival subsided into an easy-chair in her room. All movement was a difficulty to her. Again that softened expression touched her face, and her eyes lost some of their hardness. "Thank you, Hester, but I think to-night it must be Drusilla. Some other time."

Then as Hester reached the door she motioned her back. "You are a good child, Hester, and perhaps"—

Hester waited another instant, her mind in a whirl at this unexpected feeling on her mother's

part; then seeing that the latter closed her eyes wearily, she went away to send Drusilla.

Tired out with her eventful day, Hester too went early to her room. Unknown to her, Drusilla was pleading her cause eloquently, putting plain facts before her mistress as only Drusilla could.

Hester opened her window wide and looked out on a dark night full of those intangible and mysterious sounds which are only to be heard in the depth of the country when all the world is asleep. It was a clear and beautiful night, with a touch of frost in the atmosphere, and myriads of stars which yet hardly lightened the gloom of the sky. Beneath, a denser blackness disclosed the woods of Netherlands—that and the soft movement of the branches, as if a breeze swayed them to and fro. Hester felt incapable of sleep. Her senses were alert, and even when she had been in bed for some time, and the house had subsided into silence, a complexity of sensations held her in thrall. Clementina; her mother in that altered guise, to-day of all days; Roden—she thought of each in turn, putting out a hand in the darkness to touch the satin bows. Then at last she drifted from reality into dreams, to be awakened suddenly by a sound as distinct as it was indefinable. She sat up in bed and listened, putting her hair from her ears in order to hear



She put out her hand and the door swayed silently.

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more clearly. Again came the sound, and again she failed to define it.

Slipping out of bed, she made her way in the darkness to her mother's door, which stood across the narrow passage. A strip of light showed through the aperture, and within someone stirred. Hester's heart beat apprehensively. She put out her hand, and the door swayed silently. Again she touched it, reluctant to arouse her mother if she slept. Then she crept into the room and stood transfixed at the sight before her.

Mrs. Percival was sitting up in bed supported by pillows into an upright posture. Hester could see the feverish flush upon her face, the bright hard light in her eyes.

Before her was a cash-box, and upon the open lid the long, flexible fingers were arranging gold in little heaps, the coins clinking against the metal and causing the sound which had aroused Hester. Papers were scattered over the counterpane, and mingled with them a small pile of bank-notes, one of which at that moment fluttered down to the carpet almost at Hester's feet. She stooped mechanically to pick it up, and the next moment, with a start which scattered the coins over the bed, Mrs. Percival realised her presence in the room.

CHAPTER XIV

HESTER SEEKS TO KNOW THE WORST

As Hester stood there some of the coins fell from the eider-down to the floor and rolled into distant corners of the room. Mrs. Percival's glance followed them as if to trace where they went. There was a suggestion of the miser in the hard bright gaze and in the flexible fingers outspread upon the cash-box, as if to guard the hoard from unforeseen depredations.

Hester advanced towards the bed, and, as she did so, the bank-note fell from her hand and fluttered towards the fire.

Mrs. Percival's gaze grew more intent, and a sharp sound of apprehension escaped her—a long-drawn breath which echoed through the silent room. Hester stooped quickly to catch the wisp of precious paper as it fluttered perilously near the bars of the grate, whence issued little jets of flame, as if anxious for its destruction.

Placing the note upon the bed, she turned again, evading her mother's gaze, and groped in all

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the corners for the missing gold. As she placed one coin after another upon the counterpane Mrs. Percival added it to the freshly-made piles, and in a monotone kept count. To Hester it was far more like some dreadful nightmare than reality. An indescribable sensation of repugnance shook her as she caught sight of her mother's face.

This seemed worse than all. Poverty had about it some shreds of dignity which avarice lacked, and she pursued her search with eyes that burned and throbbed. Her slender figure, with its lengths of shining hair, swayed to and fro as she stooped, throwing strangely-outlined shadows on walls and ceiling. There was something terrible in the sound of her mother's voice counting, counting, counting, and always there seemed more gold to be found. After a few moments' fruitless search Hester rose to her full height. "I think that *must* be all," she said, and her voice sounded flat and strained in her own ears.

The thin fingers pointed to the gold. "There must be another sovereign somewhere," said Mrs. Percival. "Look again; it must be there."

Hester stooped again to the search, but all to no purpose. On hands and knees she went, but no coin was to be found.

"Shake the curtains; so many went towards the window."

Hester did as she was bidden, and with a ringing sound the coin fell to the floor from a fold of the chintz. The last pile complete, Mrs. Percival drew a long breath of satisfaction. She touched the summit of each with her finger-tip, having apparently forgotten she was not alone. Hester stood at the foot of the bed and watched her, gripping the brass rail with both hands so firmly that for hours afterwards her fingers felt the strain.

Mrs. Percival began to put the money into the cash-box, counting it slowly, first the gold, then the rustling notes, as if to make assurance doubly sure. Looking up for a moment, she met Hester's wide, fascinated glance. The latter put back the hair from her forehead. "Do you think it safe to have all that money in the house?" she asked, in a low tone. "Would it not be better to send it to the bank?"

Mrs. Percival frowned, then leaned forward across the open box. "No, no," she said; "I could not bear to let it go. It does me good to count it, slowly as it increases, *so* slowly in spite of my best efforts."

Hester drew a long breath. "I thought we were poor," she said, "so poor that you couldn't even have the nourishment an invalid should. Why is all that there"—she broke off and pointed to the money—"and we so much in want of absolute necessities? Why not spend a little, mother, on

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things we all need? Drusilla, too, is so short of comforts; why, we positively give her no wages and no dress."

Mrs. Percival looked up quickly. Surprise was the most noticeable expression on her face. "Use it? Spend it on food, clothes, warmth? Do you suppose this money belongs to me?"

"Naturally," said Hester quickly; "unless it belongs to my father."

Mrs. Percival closed the box with a click, and struggled into a more upright posture. A crimson spot burned on either cheek. "Your father never owned one *farthing* of it; this is mine, all mine; yet not mine to do as I like with. See"—she opened the box again, and pointed with a long, quivering finger to the contents—"every coin here represents a step towards my redemption; every sixpence, every penny, shows some effort to repay; and it grows, slowly perhaps, but surely, and some day, please God, I will pay back to the uttermost farthing."

A sudden revulsion of feeling swept over Hester. She fully imagined that her mother's mind wandered. "Yes, yes," she said, more gently, "but don't you think the bank ought to keep it for you? Imagine if burglars broke in."

Mrs. Percival leaned towards her. "That is what I sometimes fear myself," she said, speaking little

louder than a whisper ; " and when the wind blows I fancy there is someone coming to take my earnings. It worries me daily, and at night."

Hester advanced to the side of the bed and sat down, putting her hand over her mother's restless fingers. " Let me keep it for you," she said soothingly. " I am young and strong, and I know a safe place that I can lock, and you shall keep the key."

Mrs. Percival drew away her hand. The colour had faded, leaving her face white and pinched in the flickering candlelight. She spoke with a certain cold dignity, the very opposite of her manner the moment before. " Do not treat me as if I were a child, Hester: I will not have it. This money is meant for a purpose which you do not understand."

Hester rose suddenly, a stern young figure with accusing eyes. " And why do I not understand ? " she asked. " Why should I be kept in ignorance ? Why is the veriest stranger to know our family affairs, and not I ? I am no child, mother: and you" — her voice quivered for an instant — " you insult me by keeping the truth from me. If my father were a murderer hiding from justice your behaviour could not be more mysterious, more unfair. You have no right, even though you are my mother, to keep me in such ignorance."

Mrs. Percival shrank down among her pillows, and a grey look stole over her face which frightened



"And why do I not understand?" she asked.

er. She ran to the table beside the bed, and taking a restorative, raised her mother on one arm. I tried to prevail upon her to drink a little. Mrs. Percival shook her head, but Hester held it in a gentle insistence, compelling her to sip it. The pallor gave place to a more natural colour, and without a word Hester turned away, put coal on the fire, and then drew the counterpane more closely round the bed. The contents of the cashbox jingled as she did so, and arrested Mrs. Percival's attention. "Put it in the wardrobe, and bring me the key," she said.

Hester obeyed. All her movements were quiet. She realised that from the truth she was as far as ever. There was something about her mother which filled her with a sense of the irrevocable state of affairs; to beat against circumstances, to look at them from a common-sense standpoint, seemed futile in the face of her mother's persistent silence. She had made her last appeal, and if the explanation ever came it must come voluntarily from her mother. The day had been a long and tiring one; she felt a sudden access of weariness, a desire to get away to her own room. She walked towards the door, her mother's eyes following her movements. As Hester turned she saw the glance. "Can I get anything before I go?" she asked. "Try to sleep."

Mrs. Percival shook her head. Then she raised it a little from the pillow. "Come here," she said, in a low, insistent voice. Then as Hester stood beside the bed she put out her hand and caught a fold of her dressing-gown. "Stay a little while with me," she said, glancing into the corners of the room; "I am not myself to-night. If you would rather go, perhaps Drusilla would come to me."

Hester took the thin hand in her own with a swift, impulsive movement, half grateful and wholly pathetic. "You do not understand how glad I am when you ask me to do anything for you, mother. It always hurts me that we should be so far apart—the only two there are left. Let me wait on you and nurse you. It would make me so much happier. This misunderstanding is *so* hard to bear."

Mrs. Percival made no reply, but her eyes softened a little, as they had softened earlier in the evening. "Bring a chair and sit near me," she said, in a low tone.

For a few moments there was silence in the room, and Hester thought she slept. But insomnia had for several weeks held Mrs. Percival captive, and her nights were dreadful periods, the brain active, the body, of necessity, quiescent.

Perhaps Hester's personality dominated in the end. A sudden restless movement from the bed brought her eyes away from the fire. Mrs. Percival

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was struggling to turn towards her. "Listen, Hester. Ignorance is sometimes best; if I tell you all the facts you cannot fail to be very unhappy."

Hester shook back her hair; her large eyes were fixed eagerly upon the speaker's face. "I would far rather know the very worst than be kept in ignorance. Mother, tell me. Why shouldn't I know? But not if it makes you ill."

Mrs. Percival sighed, then spoke with apparent irrelevance. "Drusilla told me that the other day you met someone who lives here, a Miss—I forget the name. She asked you to call on her. Why did you not tell me this?"

"Because I never imagined it would interest you; and you made it clear to me at the beginning, mother, that we should not know anybody. She is so nice, and I am sure you'd like her. She asked me to have tea with her sometimes, and to see her flowers; she is a great gardener."

Mrs. Percival's eyes searched her face. "You would like to go?"

"So much." Hester's voice spoke volumes.

"You must remember that social intercourse of the usual kind is barred to you," said Mrs. Percival, "and, though this one acquaintance may be feasible, it may lead to others more impossible."

"Why?" asked Hester. "You have only to tell me not to visit her, and, of course, that will be

enough to prevent my going. But I think you should at least give me some reason for our condition—why we should be social outcasts. It would be fifty times easier to bear than this continued mystery. We are supposed to be too poor to afford ourselves more than the bare necessities of life”—she glanced round the meagrely-furnished room, which the fire alone served to adorn—“and yet there is a large sum of money accumulating there. I don’t mind poverty—I can bear it if you can, and cheerfully—but this continued mystery makes me too wretched for words.”

CHAPTER XV

AN OMINOUS SOUND

MRS. PERCIVAL moved her head from side to side restlessly. Hester, unable to fathom her mother's altered demeanour, looked straight before her, her hands clasped on her knee. The candle flickered and threw shadows on the wall grotesquely, while the fire aided and abetted it by sending out little jets of gas which glinted upon the warm lights in Hester's hair. She shivered involuntarily. It was a strange finish to a curiously unrestful day, and she wondered whether, after all, Drusilla had not been right in saying a time might come when she would look back on the monotony of her days and wish the change had never taken place. Until she knew more she could not quicken into being a ray of real sympathy with her mother, and without putting the thought into words, she felt that here was reserve which meant egotism personified, though perhaps to others it might have savoured of consideration. She sat there close beside the bed, but in comprehension many a mile away from her who

ought to have represented her nearest and dearest. In all her after life Hester looked back on that sleepless vigil as absolutely the most unhappy night of her life. All her being was in revolt against circumstance, against her mother, her surroundings, and the hopeless greyness of existence, for which she was not allowed to find a cure. With all the untamed spirit of youth, she felt that to run a-tilt cheerfully against the ills of existence went a great way towards bettering them. And who shall say she was very far from the truth? Not a yard from her lay the older hopelessness of one who, by her own pride, tried to solve the problem, who beat against the sorrows meted out to her, with no thought but revolt against that Providence which throughout the ages shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will to our own purposes.

The room grew very quiet. Somewhere in the distance a dog's bark trailed off into that warning cry which in some vague way suggests death and disaster. Mrs. Percival opened her eyes and stirred uneasily. "Listen! What was that? Not Jakes?"

"No, a sheep-dog on the Brewsters' farm, I expect. How weird it sounds at night!"

Hester too felt thrilled for the moment by the ominous cry, which was too far away to come from Jakes, and was, besides, the cry of a larger type of dog.

Again the sound came shrilly; louder now, with shorter intervals between, cleaving the silence of the night with a sense of infinite desolation. Involuntarily Hester's thoughts went to Roden. From the lower premises came a suppressed growl. Jakes was awake; the strange dog had communicated his fears to him. Mrs. Percival's hand stole out towards Hester's, and they listened until the long-drawn howls passed into silence.

Hester felt her mother's hand nerveless and trembling in her own, and a sudden rush of gentler feeling overcame her. Her clasp tightened on the thin fingers. "Only a dog turned out and barking at the moon," she said reassuringly, though she herself had experienced an unpleasant thrill every time the sound came.

"Something more than that." Mrs. Percival spoke with an effort. "I have never heard a dog howl in such a way since I was a girl, just married, and then it meant—death."

Hester drew a little closer, her pulses astir. "Mrs. Brewster is very ill," she said; "and I have often met her in the lanes with the sheep-dog. He is devoted to her."

To her surprise, Mrs. Percival's face lost its tense expression; a wave of relief seemed to pass over her. "That may explain it," she said; "it sounded

so near at hand, and so terribly like the other, that I thought it meant—something else."

"Tell me about the other time," said Hester partly to relieve her thoughts and partly because it was a keen and unexpected pleasure to her to learn anything of her mother's younger days and surroundings. "Were you at home or staying somewhere?"

Mrs. Percival fingered the eider-down quilt. It was one of the few relics of prosperity rescued by Drusilla from the wreckage of the home, and it was covered with an embossed design in silk of pale shades. The restless fingers traced out the flowered patterns, running lightly from one stem to another. It was noticeable of Mrs. Percival that her hands were never still; they were the most expressive part of her, an index to that restlessness of mind which seemed to consume her bodily vigour day by day. Watching them caused Hester to experience a tinge of the same restless spirit, and now she longed to take both hands and hold them tightly in her own. The one she still held, though apparently in repose, throbbed and quivered beneath her fingers.

"Tell me about the other time," she repeated.

"It seems so long ago,"—Mrs. Percival spoke slowly, as if marshalling her facts,—"only three months after my marriage. I was eighteen, I remember."

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"Younger than I am!" exclaimed Hester. "I had no idea you married so young. But then I know so little about things."

Her mother paid no heed to the remark; her thoughts were back across the years, when life had seemed made for love and enjoyment, and the triumph and praise which beauty gains.

"I was—at least, your father and I were staying at your grandfather's, and the people living around gave a series of entertainments in our honour."

"Your father or his?" interrupted Hester, leaning forward eagerly.

"His; we were staying at his house for a few days, and were returning that night from a dinner-party at a distance. It was a long drive, I remember, and part of it lay through a dense avenue of trees." She paused again, and Hester waited breathlessly, more interested perhaps in the details concerning relatives of whom she had never heard than in the mere facts themselves.

"Yes, yes," she exclaimed.

"We were near the house, the light was streaming from the hall door, which they had opened for us on hearing the sound of wheels, when from somewhere between the trees came a terrible, long-drawn howl. It simply made one's flesh tingle; I have never heard such desolation expressed until to-night. I suppose all dogs are much the same when howling,

but it struck me that it was the exact note of the other dog so many years ago. I am glad you were here."

"So am I," said Hester. "And then what happened?"

"It went on for about five minutes with very short intervals, troubling your father greatly, and the old servant waiting up for us. After it had ceased, your father said, coming back into the room, "It sounded like Rufus, but they can't find the brute anywhere." And then he said to the servant, "Don't be such a fool, Jackson, with your old wives' tales. What *should* happen?" Then he turned to me: "Jackson is lamenting it as a sign of death or calamity in the family, and feels convinced something may have happened to Tom."

"Who was Tom?" asked Hester quickly.

"Tom was a younger brother, and Rufus belonged to him. There was an idea that whenever a member of the family was dying a dog howled in this way."

"And did anything happen?" The firelight seemed to concentrate upon Hester's eager gaze as she leaned towards her mother.

Mrs. Percival said nothing for a moment; then she nodded with some reluctance. "He was abroad, in India, and that day had met with a fatal accident at polo. He died late in the evening."

"And did you know of any other instance?" asked Hester, with all that love for the supernatural which most of us possess.

"Yes; when your grandfather died it was heard again. I wish it had not happened to-night."

Mrs. Percival shivered slightly, and Hester drew the coverlet closer. "Try to forget it and go to sleep," she said. "I'll stay with you, mother. See, I'll wheel this chair to the fire, and put some coal on. You'll feel quite safe with me here, won't you?"

She rose slowly, her limbs stiff after being so long in one position, yet she felt infinitely happier than before. Her duties finished, she sat down beside the fire, determined not to fall asleep.

The next moment she heard her mother's voice. "Do you want anything, mother? No? Then let me toss up your pillow." She suited the action to the word, supporting her mother's head deftly as she did so.

With a sigh of relief Mrs. Percival's head sank on the pillow. Then she looked up at Hester almost solemnly. "Hester"—speaking with an effort—"some day I will tell you everything, but to-night, of all nights, my dear, I cannot."

There was a ring almost of appeal in her tones which, in conjunction with the rare word of affection, went to Hester's heart, hungry as it was for love and

recognition. "Tell me when and how you like, mother," she said quickly. "I will never ask you again. Sleep now."

But Mrs. Percival had something still on her mind. She looked long into the girl's clear eyes. "You are pretty—more than that, attractive and lovable," she said; "and if this acquaintance should lead to others"— She found a great difficulty in saying what she wished. "You must know, I want you to realise—that for you, poor child—there must be—nothing more. You understand?"

A wave of colour flooded Hester's face from brow to throat, but her clear eyes never wavered. "I think I understand," she said simply. "Drusilla said once, 'The sins of the'"—

Mrs. Percival shuddered and her eyes fell, but Hester's never wavered, though across her mental vision passed Roden's face as he had looked that afternoon.

Mrs. Percival suddenly raised herself on the pillows. "I mean that you must never expect to go into the society to which you would otherwise be entitled; must never take your disgrace into another family; must, in fact, never marry, until the just debt is paid; and only then if"— She broke off quickly, and her eyes turned in the direction where the money lay.

Again Hester thought she wandered. "I will

remember," she said soothingly. "Do not be so distressed ; you may trust me."

Mrs. Percival drew a long breath, and her restless fingers groped towards the speaker. "You see," she said, in the same tone of appeal, "he—he would want to know about us, to find out things ; would perhaps think justice should be done—sooner."

Swayed by a sudden impulse of tenderness, Hester bent and put her lips to the lined forehead. "You may trust me," she said again, and then she returned to the hearth.

Silence fell upon the room. When dawn crept in at the window it showed Mrs. Percival's eyes, wide and sleepless, fixed upon the chair by the fireside where Hester lay, slumbering as peacefully as a child, beside embers which had long since grown grey and cold.

CHAPTER XVI

AINSLEY EXACTS A PROMISE

"I CAME down at some inconvenience to myself," said Ainsley. His genial face looked a shade haggard in the light of the keen October day ; there were lines round the mouth and eyes, which caused Enid to turn her head aside for a moment. When she looked at him again her expression had regained its customary carelessness. She kept both hands resolutely in her muff, where hidden from sight they could be tightly folded together out of the way of his. But Ainsley made no attempt at love-making, though he had cancelled engagements, social and professional, in order to allay a doubt caused by her last letter.

"I'm sorry you bothered to come," Enid said, in reply to his remark ; "you might have written. It was such a surprise to meet you instead of a letter this morning. You know, I always come out to meet the postman."

His face lightened for an instant. "Because of that?" he asked, with an almost boyish eagerness. "You care to have them, after all?"

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Enid gave a little laugh, and lifted her muff, with its bunch of violets, towards his face. He put it aside gently, but with a certain resolution new in her knowledge of him. "No," he said, "I am not going to be played with any longer."

He put a hand on her arm to detain her, and they stood in the shelter of the little coppice, with russet leaves shaking down on them from the beeches. She glanced up at him, startled for an instant into seriousness, and the next moment he had framed the lovely face in both his hands and was looking into her eyes, his own not loverlike, but almost stern. "When I am with you, and you look like that, I believe in you," he said, with a certain quiet passion in his tones; "then comes a letter like your last, and I feel as if I had pinned my faith to a snowflake, something as fluttering and beautiful and bright, but as evanescent."

The colour rose in Enid's cheeks. "I've been told that I am like a *meringue*, a *soufflé*, or something equally sweet and illusory," she said, in her pretty, indifferent voice; "and now—a snowflake. Well, better to be good to behold, if only for a time. But I think you might find a nicer simile."

He dropped his hands to his side as if something had stung him. "I often wonder if you've any soul, any heart," he said bitterly; "and if I did not feel that somewhere deep down in your nature you have

one, I'd go away and never even see you again. At one time I thought you cared—really cared." He kicked aside a fallen branch as he spoke, looking moodily on the ground.

Enid watched a fluttering leaf descend to his shoulder, put out a finger to brush it away, then hesitated. "But I do care—really care," she said, coming a little closer, and laying a small hand upon his arm. "I care so much that it makes me very unhappy."

He held the straying fingers very closely in his own, but there was no great softening of his face. Her instability and loveliness, the restlessness, flippancy, and vague unhappiness about her, which had more than once struck Miss Octavia, in spite of Enid's gaiety, were very noticeable to-day. "Why should it make you unhappy?" he asked. "There can be absolutely no reason why it should. Tell me why."

Enid crimsoned ; something very like tears stood in her eyes. But the next moment she had drawn off her glove, and was pointing to the ring which he had given her. The opals caught a ray of sunlight and gleamed redly under their glance. Then a glint of pale blue like steel flashed out, and their eyes met. The next moment Enid was clinging to his arm with both hands and a look in her eyes which made him believe, in spite of all, that she

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greatly cared. "I can't bear to give it back," she said, as they walked along.

"Give it back! Why should you?"

"I hardly know," she replied meditatively; "but last night, I almost—only almost, Gilbert—took it off and packed it in cotton-wool to send it back to you."

"Then, bad as the letter was, the post might have brought me something worse," said Ainsley, putting the hand with the ring beneath his arm as they walked along. "I want you to promise me something, Enid. I know you will keep a promise, in spite of all your whims."

Enid sighed. "Don't be too sure," she said, with her customary gaiety. "I might break it. In fact, I have often broken promises."

Ainsley looked down at her gravely. "Not such a promise as this," he said. "I should be sorry to think that you would ever break your word or deceive me in any way. What is the matter?" For Enid had taken away her hand with a swift movement, and was walking along beside him with averted head.

"You are so frightfully solemn," she said the next moment, with a quiver in her voice; "quite different from what you were. Why should I make a promise I am likely to break?" She looked almost defiant as she glanced back at him, having gained a pace in

advance. Ainsley was very patient with her, though to-day she made his heart ache rather than gave him joy.

"You will keep this if I ask you," he remarked.

"Perhaps," said Enid, with indifference. Then curiosity overcame her. "What is it?" she asked the next moment, her mood, as usual, changing like a summer breeze; her face, with its beautiful colouring, turned over her shoulder towards him. Against himself his face softened as he looked; she was provoking, saddening, unstable as water, yet to him the dearest being in the world. Enid saw the change, and made a quick movement towards him. "Now you are going to be your real self again," she said, holding tightly to his arm; "why, we nearly quarrelled!"

"I wonder if you know my real self or I yours?" queried Ainsley, with a warm sensation at his heart as he felt the touch of her hand. "Perhaps you would not like it if you did, Enid."

"Perhaps not. I hate you to be stern." She was busy transferring the bunch of violets from her muff to his button-hole. "You can tell me now, and to reward you I'll promise beforehand. Tell me."

"It is this,"—the violets in place, Ainsley took her hands in his as if to impress upon her some touch of his own earnestness,—"that you put away all thought of that little case with the cotton-wool, and

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promise me that if there ever should come a day when you want me to have the ring back, you will tell me so, and let me take it off myself." He touched the gleaming jewel with his finger, and then put his lips to the hand that wore it. "Please God the day will never come," he added, in a low tone that sobered Enid, causing a more womanly, softened look to cross her face.

"But if it *must*," she said slowly, "if it must?"

He turned quickly at her tone. "Do you know of any reason why it should? We love one another deeply, truly—you have told me so—and when we are together I find it so possible to believe. Do you know any reason?"

"No—o." Enid spoke with an effort.

"Could it be very soon?" he asked the next moment. "Why should we wait? Let us be married before the year is out, and start the New Year together."

"No, no," exclaimed Enid, involuntarily shrinking away from him. "Oh, not for ages yet. What can you be thinking of?"

Ainsley sighed. "I shall be thinking that you do not want to marry me at all," he said.

"Oh no," exclaimed Enid, her better self again at the sight of his hurt expression, "you need never think that. Be my own patient, long-suffering boy for a little while, and promise not to say a word

about the time. They—they could not spare me yet."

Ainsley kept his disappointment to himself, though he keenly felt her continued disinclination to arrange a definite time for their marriage. "Are they good to you?" he asked the next moment, as they walked along between the thinning hedgerows.

"*Good* to me!" Enid was always at her best when discussing her relatives. "They simply spoil me, load me with everything I can desire. There is nothing left for me to wish for except"— She paused, and her tone grew less clear.

"Except—?"

"Except a different nature," said Enid, with an unusual burst of genuine self-depreciation. "Oh, Gilbert, how I despise myself sometimes when I think of the love that's lavished upon me. You, they, and ever so many people I don't care for, and"—incoherently—"you almost know my worst, don't you?—all my limitations—and yet you go on caring, my dear, *dear* boy, just as if I were the nicest being in creation."

Ainsley kissed the upraised face once, twice, thrice; but he said nothing.

"Oh, somebody will see," said Enid; "in the road, too, like any country lass and lad. Listen, I'm *certain* someone is behind that hedge."

But it was only a soft-eyed Alderney cow, chew-

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ing the cud and surveying them with a mild and meditative gaze. Ainsley smiled. His doubts had taken to themselves wings at the soft touch of her lips.

"You're coming to lunch?" asked Enid presently, as they came in sight of a lodge gate from whose cottage chimneys a trail of blue smoke was issuing.

Ainsley glanced at his watch. "I think I must get back," he said; "I only wish I could."

"You have never told me where you are staying," said Enid quickly. "Surely not at the inn? Our quarrels made me forget to ask."

"I'm staying for a few days with Roden at Netherlands. He has asked me down once or twice, and when I heard that you were within reach of the village"—

"It is only about fifteen miles," said Enid demurely. "How did you come?"

"I started to walk, and then, to save time, I got a chap in a gig to give me a lift."

"Then how are you going to get back? Walk?"

"I might get something from one of the farms." Ainsley looked about him vaguely. "To tell you the truth, I made no plans. I wanted to find you, that was all."

Enid gave his sleeve a loving little stroke in response. "I haven't met Mr. Roden yet," she said,

“but I have heard of him from Miss Octavia. He must be a paragon of all the virtues.”

“He is a very good fellow,” said Ainsley, “one of the very best, and my particular crony, of whom I do not see half enough. You will like him tremendously when you know him.”

“Perhaps yes”—Enid made a little grimace—“and perhaps no. You must stay to lunch—you are such a favourite with Uncle Shan—and then I will take you over to Netherlands in the motor. I am going to pay Miss Octavia a visit this very afternoon. Have you met her?”

“Not yet,” Ainsley smiled, “but of course she is as familiar as household words. Yes, I will stay to lunch if only for the sake of risking my life in the motor. Can you steer yet?”

“That was in the very first stages,” said Enid indignantly, “and I’m perfectly certain the wretched chauffeur was to blame. However, here we are. You shall see this afternoon *what you shall see* of my driving powers. Do you know”—pausing for a moment in the shadow of the trees, and looking up at him with unusual gravity—“you always make me feel happier—better—more ashamed of myself.” She waved a hand in an airy way characteristic of herself, and closed the discussion by walking quickly towards the hall door.

Ainsley followed her in silence. She was very

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often a mystery to him ; a being whom he could not fathom, who, by her whims, made him experience doubt rather than joy, but whom he loved deeply, absorbedly, despite the lack of that absolute unity and comprehension which, when found, makes love perfect.

CHAPTER XVII

VISITORS FOR MISS OCTAVIA

HESTER paused at the summit of the hill, and drew a long breath before descending the sloping cart track which led to her destination. Below in the hollow lay the farm inhabited by the Brewsters. The surroundings seemed very silent this afternoon, and in place of the sturdy volumes of smoke which usually issued from the chimney-stack a wavering trail of blue-grey film was all that was visible. There was very little movement in the farm buildings, but from a distant lane Hester could hear the jolting of a cart and the metallic rattle of milk cans. Over trees and hedges floated that impalpable bluish haze which is one of chill October's most beautiful achievements, and as Hester's eyes realised the quiet beauty of the scene some of its peace crept into her face. She stood for a few moments, then Jakes gently pulled her skirt. She looked down, and met his brown eyes alight with the forbidden joys of poaching.

"Come, then," she said; "we'll go and ask how

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Mrs. Brewster is. She's a nice woman, isn't she, Jakes? pleasant when we meet her, but I'm dreadfully afraid she must be worse."

Hester had spoken to Mrs. Brewster in the lane now and then. She was a stout, comely woman, with a houseful of rosy children, who threw shy smiles at Hester from behind their mother's skirts, and put out furtive, timid little fingers to stroke Jakes' smooth coat. Hester had never called at the farm before, and she made her way between the flower borders to the door, which presented an irreproachable but sealed front to her gaze. She put up a hand to the bright little knocker, then paused and looked at the trim windows on either side, both tightly shut also. That to the right was filled with growing plants, in the other was a little table bearing a crocheted mat with a large book, probably the family Bible. All was restful, but expressionless. Even Jakes seemed impressed by the silence, for, after investigating a pink china dog which guarded the entrance door, he subsided quietly at Hester's feet.

There was a clatter of a pail on the other side of the hedge, and the sound decided Hester's movements. She went quickly along the narrow path and into the farmyard, whence came sounds of life and bustle. Someone was talking to the farm-servant, a broad-faced, good-natured girl, who

stood with her hands on her hips to listen to Miss Octavia's directions.

"Some of the beef-tea, nicely warmed, in half an hour, Rose; you quite understand? The milk, if she fancies it; but she has promised to take the beef-tea, and it will be better for her. Send Johnnie up during the evening for the warm bed-jacket, and whatever you do"—

The surprise in Rose's face made the speaker turn and see Hester. She advanced quickly, holding out her hand, more pleased than she could say to find that Hester had come sufficiently out of her shell to inquire for the welfare of her neighbours. No one knew better than Miss Octavia how great an object of interest to the villagers the Percivals were, all the more so by reason of their retired ways. Hester's hesitation and explanation fled before the kindly smile. She was glad to meet Miss Octavia again. "I called to see how Mrs. Brewster is to-day," she said. "I was afraid she might be worse."

"Much better to-day." Miss Octavia nodded farewell to Rose, and led the way across the yard to the gate. "It's so nice of you to call."

"I like Mrs. Brewster," said Hester, glancing into Miss Octavia's cordial brown eyes; "she is the only one I know in the village, and it seemed so sad to think of her leaving all those little children motherless."



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"But why did that idea seize you, I wonder? Some village report? She has been ill—her enemy bronchitis—but not dangerously."

"No," said Hester; "we never really hear anything. Drusilla hardly ever talks to the people coming to the gate. It was something else which made me think so."

"The quiet, perhaps?" queried Miss Octavia, shutting the gate behind her, and walking briskly along the road.

Hester hesitated, then she began to laugh a little. "You will think it the veriest nonsense if I tell you," she said; "it—it—we thought it was an omen."

"A *what*?"

Hester gave a comical glance of appeal. Miss Octavia looked far too practical to have any belief in omens, and, indeed, Hester herself looked back at the affairs of the night as something too unlikely for credence.

"Tell me," said Miss Octavia.

"It was the howling of a dog." Hester explained herself with much reluctance. "I—we—my mother was wakeful, and I had gone to her"—

"Yes?"

"I cannot make you realise how terrible the sound was," said Hester, her tone full of half-ashamed apology. "Of course you will smile, but my mother

said it was a foreboding of death. She had heard such a sound before, and I suppose she infected me. You know things get *so* exaggerated in the dead hours of the night."

Miss Octavia's face showed no dawning of a smile. She gave one of her shrewd, quick glances at Hester's pale cheeks and dark encircled eyes, and drew a conclusion or two therefrom.

"I have heard of such cases," she said. "Dogs have a wonderful prevision all their own. It is one of those things, my dear, which we cannot comprehend, but which Providence means for some purpose beyond our earthly ken."

Hester learned later how large a part Providence played in Miss Octavia's daily round. Hers was a simple faith, which ruled her life and doings in matters great and small, a belief which gave to all her actions and her views of people that homely charity and love of her kind which should surely cover a multitude of failings. Hester turned impulsively, her eyes alight with feeling. "It is good of you not to laugh," she said; "you can't imagine how difficult it was to explain. My mother has been impressed with the idea of more misfortune all the morning, and I wanted to convince her of her mistake." "More misfortune" slipped out unconsciously, but Miss Octavia noted the remark.

"Forgive me for asking the question," she said,

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"but is your mother ill enough to need night nursing? You say you were sitting up with her."

"No; she never cares for anyone to stay with her. She is quite content to know that Drusilla can be summoned if she touches her bell. But last night she was, for some reason, very nervous, and she liked me to be with her. It shows what a miserable nurse I am; I went to sleep when the dog stopped howling."

"Where?" asked Miss Octavia quietly.

"In the easy-chair by the fire." Hester spoke remorsefully. "I was dreadfully stiff for a long time afterwards. Strange to say, Drusilla, usually such a light sleeper, heard no stir, did not even hear the dog howling. I was glad to stay up; my mother lets me do so little, and it was a real pleasure to be of use in the world at last." Her sensitive mouth quivered. Yet on the whole she was happier to-day for having crept a degree closer to her mother, even though so small a degree.

Miss Octavia tactfully changed the conversation, though, truth to tell, she was very anxious to let a little light upon her neighbour's concerns; and this from no mere curiosity, but because she held the belief that we can help in a thousand ways to bear one another's burdens. And Hester pleased her greatly.

"When are you coming to see me?" she asked.

"I'm quite looking forward to your first visit. I suppose," waving a gauntleted hand in the direction of her gate, which at that moment became visible, "it is of no use asking you in to tea?"

"May I come to-day, now?" asked Hester, moved by her desires to sudden action. "I may, if you will have me; and, do you know, I was dying to ask you to invite me! I simply longed to come, and I think Drusilla is even more anxious."

"What a sensible person Drusilla must be," exclaimed Miss Octavia. "My dear, I am simply delighted. I felt we should be friends, and now that you have permission you must often run in to see me. I hear you and Anthony Roden are old acquaintances."

"We knew one another for years in London." Hester's colour rose a little. "He came a great deal to my aunt's house in town, but when he went abroad we lost sight of one another. Things, you see, were different."

"He may be in to tea this afternoon," said Miss Octavia, leading the way through the gate. "Oh yes, bring your dog by all means. He won't scratch up the borders, will he? No, I thought not. Come and see my grapes; such beauties, aren't they? And every one of them I thinned myself. May I send a bunch to your mother?"

"You are very kind"—Hester looked perplexed at

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the difficulty in convincing her new acquaintance of her mother's bitter unapproachableness—"perhaps a small bunch when I go home."

"Then I'll cut it this moment before it gets too dark."

And Miss Octavia suited the action to the word by promptly arming herself with scissors and mounting a set of steps alertly. Hester held them anxiously, but Miss Octavia laughed at such unnecessary precautions, and descended in safety a moment later with a fine bunch in her hand.

"No, though I say it, who perhaps should not, there were none finer at the show," she remarked. "Now, come along. Who's that?"

A step outside the greenhouse door brought the colour to Hester's face, but she was just her friendly self, without a shade of embarrassment, when Roden greeted her. There was the most evident pleasure and astonishment in his eyes—a look which made Miss Octavia turn her glance away with a half smile and a very genuine sigh. She would have discovered his secret then had she not known it, and the sigh was for the difficulties which might cause the course of his love to run the reverse of smoothly.

Miss Octavia's sanctum looked very cosy with its shaded lamp and glowing fire of logs. The brass kettle stood in the fender and a plate of tea-cakes on the ruddy tiled hearth.

Miss Octavia read her letters, and allowed her visitors to make the tea between them, which they proceeded to do with all the pleasure which had attended the old schoolroom days in London. Miss Octavia smiled to herself at the sound of Hester's gay little laugh, and she darted a glance now and then over the pages of the letter, comprehending not a word. "Do you remember?" reached her more than once during the proceedings, and she realised how absolutely boyish Roden could be under some circumstances.

Hester poured out tea while Roden waited upon them and told of his adventure with Clementina and the muffin-man. Hester looked another being, and Miss Octavia marvelled at the change. She had thrown off her hat, and the firelight danced on all the brightness of her hair, lurking in the dimples which had lain too long hidden. From his corner of the hearth Roden watched every line of the little face he loved, silently blessing Miss Octavia for his happiness and hopes. Jakes slumbered peacefully upon the rug.

Suddenly there came the sound of a motor horn, and Miss Octavia looked up. The next moment the door opened and Enid entered, accompanied by Ainsley. While the greetings were taking place Hester's glance went to the girl, who stood, the firelight full on her beautiful face, with that unmis-

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takable air of luxury and riches and good-breeding which surrounded Enid Drake at all times. There was something else that puzzled Hester — some vague memory which crossed her mind, as we recollect persons seen and encountered in a dream. So absorbed was she that she hardly realised that Miss Octavia was effecting an introduction between her and the new-comers.

"I should like you to know one another." Miss Octavia laid her hand on Hester's arm. "Enid, let me introduce to you Miss Hester Percival."

For an instant Enid remained motionless, her large eyes fixed upon Hester. Then she put out a hand as if to touch the table near her, sweeping a heavy ivory paper-knife with a crash to the ground.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE REASON WHY

AINSLEY stooped quickly to rescue the paper-knife, and even as he did so Enid recovered herself. She threw her head back and met Hester's glance. Roden, an interested onlooker, thought the smile with which she greeted the introduction more than a little forced. He was something of a physiognomist, and the face of his friend's *fiancée*, though undeniably beautiful, in a vague way repelled him. He withdrew his glance to look at Ainsley, who, regardless of any *contretemps* beyond the falling paper-knife, had gone towards the hearth, and was making overtures to Jakes. Ainsley looked at peace with creation, having in Enid's society dismissed all the doubts which had troubled him earlier in the day. Then Roden suddenly caught his own name, and realised that an introduction was taking place, and that Miss Drake was holding out to him a very friendly hand, which she had not extended in Hester's direction. And Enid could be delightful when she chose. Hester, from her post behind Miss

Octavia, noted the charming smile, the finished woman-of-the-world air with which she greeted Roden.

"I have heard so often from Gilbert of his 'own familiar friend,'" she said, "that naturally I am delighted to meet you, and to find that we can form quite a little coterie of our own down here."

She turned, still smiling, towards Miss Octavia. That lady gave a dry smile, which yet held some anxiety behind its humour. She knew Enid to be a born coquette; it was as natural to her to flirt as for the sun to shine.

"She must not, she shall not, exercise her powers of fascination on Anthony," Miss Octavia said to herself, forgetting her match-making plans of a short time before; but aloud she remarked drily, "We think nothing of fifteen or twenty miles in these machine-driven times, my dear Anthony. Literally I suppose it should make us more neighbourly; but I very much question if it does."

"She never loses an opportunity of deriding the latest mode of locomotion," said Enid, with a gay laugh. "You must join me in persuading her to try it. It is so quick. Horses seem indescribably slow nowadays."

"Like myself, Miss Octavia still prefers our four-footed friends," remarked Roden quietly, studying the beautiful face before him.

Enid only laughed again lightly, and threw off her motoring coat, disclosing, as Ainsley took it from her, all the daintiness of her pale-hued frock, with its soft trimmings and laces, and the dainty trifles of jewellery which secured them here and there. There was something triumphant in her beauty, and in the luxury and affluence which surrounded her. Every person in the room looked at her, each possessed by a totally different sensation. And all the time she continued to ignore Hester, never by a glance including her in the conversation. Roden felt unreasonably angry. Looking across the room, he saw Hester's eyes regarding the new-comer with a species of fascinated admiration and an expression which seemed almost to suggest dislike. The charm of the afternoon had gone. Conversation hung fire, though Miss Octavia gallantly tried to stir its ashes into life.

In a few moments Hester rose to go. Roden, from his place near Enid, noticed the movement, and saw, too, that she threw a glance in his direction. He understood, and, rising, took up the shabby little hat and coat, which lay on a chair near him. Enid glanced round in surprise as Hester took the hat from him, and, with it still in her hand, prepared to say farewell to her hostess.

"Come again, very soon," said Miss Octavia, with a cordiality there was no mistaking; "and

next time, remember, it must be a much longer visit."

Then, as Hester smiled back at her, something in the wistful eyes impelled Miss Octavia to lean forward and kiss the pale cheek. She too had observed Enid's manner, and felt very much annoyed. Enid only bowed, with the same forced smile which did not touch her eyes; but Ainsley, remembering his friend's confidences of a few weeks before, came forward eagerly. Hester smiled back at him involuntarily, and held out her hand.

"I was afraid you had quite forgotten me," he said, with an earnestness which caused Enid's eyes to open in some surprise; "but I met you once or twice at the Feildings' during their pleasant evenings. What good times those were!"

"I remembered you at once," said Hester, "though you came so seldom. Yes, they were pleasant times."

As usual, she had flushed all over her transparent face at the moment of his greeting, her colour fading as suddenly. Ainsley felt a sudden spasm of sympathy, and a doubt as to whether he had not made a mistake in mentioning the days of her enjoyment. He regarded her with interest and friendliness as she turned to Roden and held out her hand in farewell.

Roden shook his head imperceptibly, smiling

a little. "I will see you safely home," he said, holding the door open. Her coat was on his arm.

"Please, no," she said; "it is only a few minutes' walk, and I am quite accustomed to be alone."

She turned half appealingly to Miss Octavia, but the latter only smiled, peered from the darkened window, and shook her head, while Jakes pressed close to the skirts of his mistress, as if to protest that he was sufficient guide. At the moment Hester did not want even Roden. Her heart was hot within her; she felt an overpowering desire to run away from her fellows to the uttermost parts of her solitude, realising acutely that she was no longer of them or they of her. It was an indescribable sensation, born of many things—of her shabbiness and ambiguous position—and accentuated by the tacit ignoring of her by the one girl of her own station whom she had met for many months.

As Roden held out her coat for her she would not meet his glance; her hands were trembling as she slipped into it and tried to fasten it. He quietly pushed her fingers away and buttoned it himself, with a certain slow and careful gravity, as if she were a child. Then he handed her the shabby little hat which she had been ashamed for the other girl to see. She put it on with fingers that trembled more than ever. While she did so Roden walked to the door and opened it. A stream of cold air entered,



As Roden held out her coat for her she would
not meet his glance.



and a sudden whirl of wind shook the tree-tops. He closed it again, and put on his own coat. Hester waited impatiently. She did not want him to know all that troubled her, all the small things which surely no man would understand and sympathise with—the mingled jealousy and longing and regret which had swept away all those finer instincts roused by last night's vigil. A sudden shock of self-abasement seized Hester. She turned at the door.

“Don't come with me,” she said, not realising how much her face revealed. “I want to be quite by myself, quite alone, *please*. I would infinitely rather.”

For reply he led her outside and closed the door behind them, drawing her hand through his arm. Something in the touch quieted Hester instantly. She knew he comprehended, at least in part.

“You surely do not mind *that*,” he said, when they had left the lights of the motor and the waiting chauffeur behind them.

“But I do,” exclaimed Hester, with a break in her voice; “it's very small-minded and trivial of me, but I do most horribly. It shows that after all I was wrong—quite wrong—to go into the world again. Was it my”—she paused an instant, and drew a long breath—“my shabbiness, do you suppose, or that—that—*she had heard something?*”

In the dim light Roden's face grew stern with

self-repression, but when he answered his voice was very gentle. "Why should it be either?" he asked, looking down at the outline of the face beside him. Hester's hand unconsciously tightened its hold of his arm, and something in the appealing touch roused Roden's chivalry in every fibre. She paused abruptly without taking away her hand, some dim reflected light from the west irradiating her face.

"Neither? But you know as well as I that she was different, *quite* different to me. I might have been a being from another world. Oh, how indescribable it was! You saw it yourself, so did Miss Octavia. It made Mr. Ainsley all the more anxious to be kind. And, do you know, at first she reminded me vaguely of someone. She is lovely. Look at her frock, her rings, the thousand and one things she has. No wonder she ignored me. Yet if I thought it was only my shabby gown, I would not really mind. Such things do not matter half so much as"—

The wind was soughing gently among the tree-tops, as if far up in the sky a storm gathered its forces. And a sudden whirl of feeling shook Roden at the moment, but when he spoke his voice was almost monotonous. "Why do you let such things trouble you? You would not, but that you seem for some reason to be living at high tension. It is not in the least like you to mind such trifles. You have led too dull a life down here."

Hester pushed her hair back from her eyes, where a sudden breeze had blown it. "After all, it *is* despicable of me to care," she said, with some of her old energy, "and perhaps part of it, at least, was envy. You know I do love dainty things, and it is a real trial to have to go about shabby. One doesn't mind until one goes into the world again."

They were walking near the boundary wall of Netherlands as she spoke, and the sight reminded Roden of a long-cherished project to which hitherto he had not seen his way.

He smiled, and shook his head. "Not envy."

"Perhaps," said Hester, "but not all. I am going to ask you a question. If someone belonging to you had—had"—she faltered, and then went on with a very visible effort—"done something disgraceful, and people were cold to you and ignored you, would you not think it due to the disgrace?"

"Possibly I should," said Roden; "but you know what some call disgrace others term trifling peccadilloes. It, after all, greatly depends on the point of view."

Hester shook her head, and her lips for a moment lost their soft curves. "Some disgrace is like some beauty," she said, "too unmistakable to be denied by anybody. And—and"—she averted her face—"I am afraid that is what our disgrace is—too great to be denied."

The bitterness of her tone sent a wave of pain through Roden. "Poor little girl! why should you have to face such things at your age? Surely you are taking an exaggerated view of matters. You see in my ignorance I can do nothing to help you."

"But you do, you can," exclaimed Hester impulsively; "you are the greatest comfort to me. I wish I could tell you everything, but the fact is I do not know myself exactly what it is about my father and I *cannot* think my mother the fine character Drusilla and the Italian believe her to be." She drew a little nearer, speaking almost in a whisper, as if half ashamed. "To me she seems so hard; there is even a kind of relentlessness about her that repels me more than I can say. I am ashamed of my feelings, and could speak of them to no one else, not a soul in the world but you."

"Thank you," said Roden, in a low tone. "A good deal that was all. Then just before they turned the corner of the road which hid from them the cottage gate turned to her. "Will you in a day or two come and see Netherlands? Miss Octavia will bring you, and there shall be no one else."

Hester hesitated for a moment. Then she slipped her hand from his arm. "I will come," she said. "I shall like to come."

As they turned the corner of the road she paused.



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Outside the gate was a four-wheeled cab, its lights shining dimly through the mist.

There was very visible terror in Hester's eyes as she looked at her companion. "Who can it be?" she asked, as Jakes growled and sniffed audibly at the horse's hoofs.

"Someone to see Mrs. Percival perhaps," said Roden, naturally arriving at this obvious conclusion.

But the reply did not satisfy Hester. She bade him a hurried good-bye, and the next moment the gate clanged behind her and Jakes, leaving him in darkness, solitude, and doubt.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FAMILY SKELETON

HESTER'S pulses quickened as she hurried up the path. On either side of the hall door the windows were lighted, that of the kitchen sending out the warmer glow. The house was very still, but outside there was an incessant swaying of the trees, and a certain vague suggestion of the storm which was gathering. For an instant Hester held the handle of the door, rallying her own forces against some vague foreshadowing of ill tidings. Never during their tenancy had a conveyance of this kind stopped at the gate. She turned the handle and went into the hall, Jakes slipping in before her. She paused ; there were voices in the sitting-room, voices which at her approach ceased suddenly. The next moment the door opened, and Drusilla came into the hall with visible signs of agitation on her face. She closed the door and motioned silently towards the kitchen, and Hester, nothing loth, followed her there.

Drusilla fidgeted with the kettle, then stirred the fire ; but Hester could see that tears stood thickly in

the old woman's eyes. Indeed, a corner of the large white apron went up to them, and Hester, pale and concerned, could keep silence no longer. "What is the matter?" she asked, uncertainty of mind making her impatient. "Who is in there, Drusilla? I saw the cab outside."

Drusilla hesitated, and Hester, with a quick movement, took the old servant's wrists between her fingers, and compelled her to meet her glance.

Without more ado Drusilla dropped into a chair and sobbed audibly, a thing hitherto unheard of in Hester's knowledge of her; for the intrepid old servant had borne not only her own sorrows, but those of her mistress with a valiance beyond praise.

Hester knelt down beside her. "What is it, Drusilla?" she asked gently, taking on herself Roden's mantle of repression. "Bad news? Tell me, please; tell me at once."

Drusilla suddenly raised her head and passed a large, motherly hand across Hester's face, putting the hair from her brow. "It's good news and it's bad, my lamb," she said solemnly, "and that it should have to be called good makes the sadness of it."

"Yes?" Hester still knelt, her eyes wide and questioning. "Will you tell me, Drusilla, or shall I ask in there? I am determined to know everything."

The sitting-room bell rang sharply, and Hester

started to her feet. But Drusilla reached the door before her and was half-way across the hall in an instant; she shook her head warningly at Hester and the latter returned to the kitchen, irresolute and wretched. But Drusilla reappeared immediately. "You're wanted in the sitting-room, please, Mrs. Hester."

Some agitation seemed working in the old woman's face; she hesitated as Hester moved towards the door, then laid a detaining hand on her arm. "You'll not take it hard of her if she seems glad," she asked pleadingly. "She's had a cruel trouble to bear, and every day and night the fear of what might happen."

Hester put away the wrinkled fingers gently enough, but very determinedly. Her lips were white as she moved away, Drusilla watching her in an absolute anguish of pity which could find no words against the immovability of Hester's form. The opposite door opened and closed again quickly, but for this time Hester did not pause on the threshold of the sitting-room.

Mrs. Percival lay, as usual, propped up with cushions on the couch; her lace had fallen on the floor beside her, and her thread lay in a tangled mass upon the table near the lamp. Otherwise nothing was altered, yet Hester realised in a vague way that the room held tragedy. She re-

it in her mother's quickened breath, in the brightness of her eyes, and the vivid spot of colour which burned on either cheek. Upon the hearthrug facing the door stood the curio dealer. He bowed gravely as Hester turned towards him, and came forward when she held out her hand. She hardly knew whom she had expected to see, but there came a quick sense of relief on recognising one who had at least agreed that the family secrets ought not to be kept from her.

Her greeting over, she glanced at her mother, standing, as she did so, uncertainly in the centre of the room, midway between the couch and the hearth, where the visitor had again taken up his position. His quick eyes realised under what a strain Hester laboured, and he put forward a chair. But Hester shook her head, unconsciously ranging herself nearer his part of the room than that of Mrs. Percival. The latter's restless fingers strayed over the light rug or pressed her handkerchief into a multitude of minute folds. Indeed, she seemed absorbed in their regularity, stroking them into place with an apparent oblivion to what was going on in the room.

Hester looked from her mother to the visitor, and then back to the restless fingers. Her pulses had quieted down. After all, she told herself, she need not have expected a scene. But the events of the

afternoon had all contributed to rouse her from her usual mood of endurance. She moved a degree closer to the couch. The long, flexible fingers paused an instant, then pressed a fold closer with a careful attention which stirred Hester to quick resentment. "You sent for me, mother?"

Mrs. Percival glanced up for a moment, her fingers still busily employed. Then something in Hester's expression seemed to rouse her, for she desisted and the colour in her cheeks faded a little. She half raised herself on the cushions. "Do you look like that, Hester," she said, a sharp ring in her voice piercing its customary monotone; "there is no necessity. *I knew* last night."

Hester's thoughts went back like a flash to the events of the previous evening. Her face, pale before, grew very white. She turned and looked at the Italian, and coming forward he placed a chair close to her, and gently led her towards it. "You are faint; is it not so?" he asked.

But Hester rose swiftly to her feet again, pushing the chair away from her. "I am tired of all this mystery," she said, and her voice held an indignation that throbbed in its tones which went straight to the listener's heart; "it is my right to know the truth to have facts instead of vague insinuations, which are far, *far* worse than any reality. Mother, I *want* to know our disgrace—now, this moment. Oh, ma-

her tell me what it is, or tell me yourself if she will not! Think of the cruelty"—

Her voice broke off suddenly, she turned away and walked towards the hearth, leaning her forehead against the high mantelshelf. She felt in that moment at enmity with the world, and with her mother most of all.

The Italian broke the silence. Into his black eyes came a flash of determination touched into being by Hester's appeal. He turned to Mrs. Percival. "She must know," he said; "she should have been told long ago. It is no kindness to keep the family affairs from such as she; it is, as she says, a cruelty. And after all"—he shrugged his shoulders—"other men have done as much, and worse."

Hester turned and looked at her mother, but it was upon the visitor Mrs. Percival fixed her bright hard glance. "Surely not many," she said, in a low tense voice which held Hester spellbound, so full was it of burning resentment. "Not many, let us hope, have caused the ruin of several homes, the death of two people, all the madness and the shame. Every bit I eat chokes me when I think that somewhere, owing to him and to me, those go hungry who should have plenty. Every flash and crackle of the coal"—she pointed a long finger at the grate, where a small fire burned, a finger quiver-

ing with so much resentment that her listeners followed it speechlessly—"goes through me indescribably. Shame is my companion through the days and long, long nights, and will follow me until the debt is paid to those that remain. If we starved, if we denied ourselves warmth and clothing, it would never make atonement for his doing and mine. He was a *cheat*—yes, I will say it—and so was I—wearing diamonds, living in luxury, tricked out in furs and silks which cost others the workhouse, and—*worse*. I *will* speak"—she had raised herself into an almost upright position in her excitement—"I must speak. It has been burning here for months—years—ever since that day I realised the depths of our degradation. We are better treated than we deserve. It was the only way out for him, and for me."

Her frenzy suddenly seemed to desert her; she collapsed among the pillows, and put her hand to her head. Hester, trembling with the horror of it all, looked speechlessly at the visitor. He went nearer to the couch, and Mrs. Percival looked up at him piteously. Her face was a dull grey-white, and drops of weakness stood upon it. "You must tell her, after all," she said, in a faint tone. "Drusilla; send Drusilla."

"Pray allow me," said the Italian, when Drusilla appeared; but Mrs. Percival waved him aside as

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the strong old servant half led, half supported her mistress from the room.

Hester had not stirred from her place. When the footsteps sounded in the room above she drew a long breath and glanced round. "Is it true?" she asked, in a voice little louder than a whisper.

"My dear young lady"—he began.

But Hester never noticed the interruption. "Is it true, or"—she glanced at the couch, then turned her eyes away, as if to shut out some painful recollection—"or is she mad? Surely she must be."

Her listener drew a chair forward.

"No, no. Oh, how tired I am of it all!" said Hester wearily. "The never-ending evasion. You are to tell me; she said so, and you say I ought to know, yet here you begin hesitating. Is there no one who knows but you? No one who will tell me plainly the very worst there is to know?"

The Italian took a step or two up and down the room, pausing on his way to pick up the fragment of lace from the floor. Then he stopped abruptly and faced her. "You shall know now, this moment you shall know. It is not, as you say, fair or just; no, it is not. Your mother, poor lady, she speaks so because it has broken her heart, she has preyed upon it so long; but blame is not hers."

"But my father?"

Her companion shook his head gravely. "He

speculated ; it was his passion, and when he won all well ; when he lost—it was terrible."

"Yes?"

"He lost, and lost, and lost ; other people money, even the little savings of the poor, their as well as his own, and one day the crash fell. A was discovered"—

"That was when my mother was taken ill?"

"A little more than two years ago. Then yo father was bound to hide himself away, otherwi he would have been"— He paused and cleare his throat.

"I understand," said Hester ; "and you help him to hide?"

Her companion bowed. "He was my best frien when I was in difficulties, and I loved him muc He was good and kind in many ways, but I gambled—it was his ruin."

Hester's face was very pale, but her eyes looke steadily at the speaker. "Tell me, did he ruin s many? Have people starved and died because him, or did my mother"—

"They—yes, it meant the ruin of many."

Hester walked across to the table and looke down at the couch. "She should have told m before ; it is better to know such things." Sh spoke in a low tone. Then a sudden thought struc her. "Is that why she works so incessantly, save

and pinches and half starves herself? Is that why she counts her money in the dead of the night like a miser?"

"That is why."

Hester sat down in a chair by the table, fingering the thread into a more tangled skein. Then she put it aside and looked up at him. "Bad as it is, I am glad to know; yes, very glad. Perhaps"—her hand tightened again on the mass of thread, and she broke a length into little pieces—"perhaps my father did not realise that such terrible things would happen; perhaps"— She looked almost imploringly at her companion, who only bent his head.

"Surely not," he remarked, in his courteous way; "but gamblers never realise the end; it is their madness."

Hester suddenly stood up, supporting herself by one hand against the table, her face eloquent with feeling. "But, in spite of all, I am sorry, so sorry for him; yes, *more* sorry for him, I think. Did you give him my message that day? You remember—my love, and the hope that I might go and see him?"

The Italian bowed, and then cleared his throat. "It was the last thing he understood. He died last night."

Hester suddenly dropped into the chair she had vacated. Then she made a strong effort, and motioned him to one on the other side of the table.

"I would rather you told me everything now," said, with a womanliness and dignity curiously variance with the youthful lines of her face; "is the one opportunity. That is why you came—tell my mother?"

Her companion in his turn twisted the thread absently between his fingers. "That is why I came. I knew that, for some reasons, sad as it sounds, would be a relief; for two years now your mother has been fearing day by day and hour by hour."

Drusilla's words came back to Hester at that moment. "He was very ill the day I called to you?"

"So ill that even when speaking to you I thought he must be dead. But he lingered, unconsciously until just before the end, when he recognised me and I gave him your message. I was with him all the night, and he said"—the speaker lowered his head for an instant—"he said, 'Poor little Hester. Perhaps in the next world we shall have the opportunity to make up for all the mistakes and the wrongs we do and the misery we cause in this.' And then there came the end."

"Thank you for telling me, thank you for helping him," said Hester. "Oh, why did I not know I might have been some comfort to him. I should always like to believe that it was a mistake, a mistake that he was sorry."

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Sorry? It broke his heart. I tell you he was good in all but that ; it was a mania, a curse, what you will, but his ruin. It is best so ; the fear is ended now."

Hester's lips formed a question she could not ask.

" It will be the day after to-morrow. I came with all haste, fearing to write or telegraph."

" May I go ? "

He shook his head. " Better not. She says no ; she trusts me to do all. Do not ask her. She is a little wild, a little what you call fanatic on the subject, my dear young lady. It is brooding too long, and the strain and the anxiety. You must be patient with her. Since her illness she has had no other thought."

" No," said Hester slowly, " she has had no other thought. It is wrong, surely ; we seem quite wrong, and not like other people. You must go ? But not before you have had something to eat. Drusilla will bring it—or I will ; she is upstairs."

But Drusilla was lying in wait with a tray, and Hester went up to her room for a moment. As the visitor was going she slipped a coin into his hand. " It is mine, all I have, but I should like you to get some flowers—a wreath, a cross—anything just to show that—that—someone cares."

The Italian bowed, and put the coin carefully away ; it was half a sovereign, the last remnant

of Hester's allowance from her prosperous days, treasured up these two years. "Mrs. Percival has entrusted the money you spoke of to me to take care of," he said, "so you need fear no breakers-in. It is safer so. Good-night."

"Good-night, and I thank you more than I can say."

She watched the lights of the cab flash into the darkness. It was a wild night, wet and tempestuous. A sudden storm of wind arose, stinging her face with sleety rain. She went back into the hall and slowly upstairs, but her mother's door was closely shut against her, and there was no response to her knock.

She returned to the kitchen; it was empty, for Drusilla was with her mistress. Only Jakes was there, ready to desert his bone for her sake. As he sprang upon her knee Hester laid her head on the table, and sobbed for very loneliness and desolation.

CHAPTER XX

"IS LOVE WORTH WHILE?"

BERRYDALE ceased his ministrations about the room and went out, closing the door softly upon the two occupants. Roden struck a match and lighted his cigar, but Ainsley, leaning forward with his elbow on the white tablecloth, looked with a frown into space. Glancing up, he met Roden's eyes. Then he too lighted a cigar, but after a moment fell into a brown study and let it go out again. Berrydale's entrance with coffee and his subsequent departure failed to rouse him. Roden smoked on imperturbably. Never a great talker, he too had thoughts, and long thoughts to-night, and he felt almost grateful for his friend's absorption. Presently he roused himself to his duties as host, and, across the wreaths of smoke, glanced at Ainsley's face. Its expression was serious, almost spiritless, a very unusual characteristic for his genial features to wear. There came a sudden lashing of sleet against the window pane and a roar of wind in the chimney. Ainsley started and sat erect. "A

stormy night," he remarked, walking across the room and drawing back the heavy curtains. "I see the clouds racing along. Glad I haven't to face the weather to-night."

Roden too crossed to the window and gazed out. His thoughts went to Hester, and to the wildness of her mood. Outside a thin crescent struggled from a bank of clouds, only to be obscured the next moment. An indescribable restlessness and longing descended upon Roden, and an apprehension of what might be happening to her—ill tidings, perhaps, to add to her loneliness. And at the moment Hester wept alone, a sorry little Cinderella, for very loneliness of heart.

Roden took a few paces along the room, absent in his turn, until he met the puzzled glance of his companion. "It's the roughness of the night, I believe," said Roden, with a forced smile; "it gets into one's bones and makes one intolerably restless. Come into the library and finish your story. Rooms always exercise a certain influence over me, and I can never settle down in this one."

"What a dear old place it is, though," said Ainsley, as they crossed the hall, with its portraits, its candles in silver sconces, shallow stairs, and corner cupboards wherein precious pieces of china reposed; "but it strikes one as a somewhat solitary."

Roden closed the library door with a quick movement of relief, and threw another log on the already huge fire. “This is the only room worth inhabiting,” he said; “at all events, the only room that strikes cheerfully. I never imagined I was such a gregarious beggar until I came to inhabit the home of my fathers.” He drew the large chair closer to the blaze. “You’ve often accused me of a preference for my own society, but, do you know, Ainsley, there’s the solitude of *years* in Netherlands; it has literally eaten into the walls and furniture. Something seems to brood over the place that all the fires we light can’t disperse. Moral atmosphere gets into houses I verily believe, and we’ve not, on the whole, been a genial crew. You’ve perhaps noticed the family expression? It struck me most forcibly on the night of my return, and I wondered”—

“Yes?” asked Ainsley, not too absorbed in his own affairs to notice the unusual mood of his friend.

Roden looked into the heart of the glowing logs with a grim, half-ashamed smile. “How soon it would descend on me, if, indeed, it has not already.”

“Pooh, nonsense,” said Ainsley. “You’re not a bit like one of them. But it must be prodigiously lonely here in the long winter evenings. Plenty to read, of course,” glancing round at the well-filled

shelves, "but books, though more congenial than many of one's acquaintances, are not *thing*."

Townsman as he was, his friend's existence in him no tinge of envy. "You'll have to Roden."

He spoke without thought, and the words sooner escaped him than he wished a the times to recall them. Roden said nothing moment, only glancing intently into the face almost as expressionless as if carved in Then he threw his partially-smoked cigar in midst of the logs, taking careful aim, as if minded to touch a certain mark.

Ainsley followed the movement.

"You saw her to-day at Miss Octavia's, Roden the next moment. "You were surprised to find them living down here?"

"Naturally."

Neither man realised that Hester's name had been spoken.

"It was a mere curious coincidence," Roden said, in his slow, level tones; "and I took it as a good omen, imagining there was some meaning in it, that being nearer would make it easier perhaps one day she might even"—he glanced round the beautiful old room—"even come to *see* us."

There was a long pause. Ainsley deliberately refrained from glancing in the other's direction. He felt tongue-tied, yet afraid lest Roden should think him unsympathetic. His speech when it came was not felicitous. “And now, I suppose, you will not care to marry into the family? What a change from former days.”

Roden sat erect, a quick look of anger in his eyes. “Not marry into the family? What do you mean?”

Ainsley met his glance fully, and for an instant the only spark of antagonism they had ever known flashed between. It was gone in an instant, but both men realised acutely that it had been there. Ainsley, always impulsive, bridged over an awkward moment, and one that might for ever have broken the close bond of friendship between them, by holding out his hand. Roden grasped it with a sense of danger past, and then rose to his feet, standing where his own face was in shadow. He broke the silence presently, speaking with some difficulty of what lay closest to his heart. “Would you in my place if—if you cared—and you must know from your own happiness, Ainsley—would you give her up just because of poverty and trouble, even disgrace?”

Enid's face, as he had seen it last, rose before Ainsley's eyes. Could he? “No,” he said slowly,

"not for other people's failings, but for ~~her~~ perhaps. Any deception on the part of a person concerned would be the one impossible thing to forgive. That would be out of question."

Roden looked meditatively into the burning embers, and followed the sparks as they disappeared up the cavernous recesses of the chimney. A storm circled round the house in eddying which sent light twigs and fragments of glass against the window pane. He dropped again into his chair. "I wonder," he said slowly; "it is a wide subject to discuss. People often let a foolish kind of pride ruin their existences. For you know, Ainsley, whatever the life hereafter may hold, of us are human enough to crave happiness in it. In spite of the trouble, I mean sooner or later to marry Hester Percival, if she will have me."

Ainsley paused in the act of lighting an cigar; his face wore a puzzled look. "But you know, you have heard what the trouble is?"

Roden shook his head.

"I remembered after you had gone that night when it came back to me. A sad story. Shall I tell you?" Ainsley paused as the other held up his hand.

"Not a word. If you don't mind I will tell you this, though. It was not murder or manslaughter? That's enough, thank you. It goes against

the grain to hunt up her family affairs, and she will tell me herself one day.”

Ainsley’s face broke into a very pleasant smile. “Just the same quixotic, dear old chap.”

“Now, about your own affairs,” Roden interrupted hastily, as if glad to change the subject. “Must you go back to-morrow? And is the date fixed? You know you told me this morning you were determined to settle events.”

Ainsley sighed ruefully. “No, the day is apparently as far off as ever, but I have been at times during the last hours ideally happy. To-morrow”—He leaned forward with clasped hands, his face changing suddenly to a gravity very foreign to it. “Do you know, Roden, I have felt so desperate lately that I question very much whether love is worth all the misery it causes. Why should a woman have the power to fill the man who loves her with happiness one moment and to wring his heart the next? Caprice”—he spoke bitterly—“should have no part in a woman’s love. Yet to-day, when Enid spoke of putting an end to our engagement for no apparent reason, she convinced me for the first time that she really cared for me.” He hesitated. “Don’t imagine me disloyal, but something in the look of Hester Percival to-day made me think that the man who marries her—I remember, of course, what you said long ago—will

be a lucky chap. She looks true as steel, as she'd go through fire and water; while Enid"— I started up and took a quick step through the room bringing himself up suddenly before Roden with perplexed frown upon his face. "The fact horrible as it sounds, distrustful and all that, never feel quite sure of Enid from one day another. I'm a fool, a contemptible fool, the way I watch for the post, snatch at her letters when they come, and dread to open them. She's the only woman in the world for me, and yet"— I dropped into his chair again, his head between his hands.

And Roden could offer no sympathy but that silence.

CHAPTER XXI

WAS IT A KIND REFUSAL?

IT was two days later. Ainsley had returned to town in a frame of mind in which hope and fear rapidly alternated.

In spite of the solitude, Roden was glad to be alone again. Since his visitor's departure he had taken long walks, scanning the landscape at every turn for a well-beloved little form that never crossed his path. When not walking he visited Miss Octavia in the vain hope that Hester might renew her visit; and it is to be feared that Miss Octavia found her favourite something of a trial, though she always welcomed him in the old friendly way.

On the second afternoon he looked in on her as she was investigating her greenhouse. "Come out for a walk with me," he said, by way of greeting—he had called earlier in the day—"and I'll bless you if you'll ask me to dine with you to-night. Talk about her I must."

Miss Octavia realised that this was no time for half measures. She promptly divested herself of her

gardening apron, tucked away her gloves in a capacious pocket, hung the garment on a nail and announced herself ready to accompany him. "I was just meditating a walk," she said in her cordial manner, "being one of those who grant a favour graciously and as for dinner, I longed to ask you, but I made up my mind you would prefer your own society to mine. It will make a veritable day of it; for after our walk we shall give me a cup of tea at Netherlands, and then I shall be with you all the time if you like"—

Roden's sombre face brightened. He patted her arm affectionately and brushed a withered leaf off from her coat. "It's very good of you to put up with my egotism," he said; "just like you. You always follow the village example, but come to you for relief of aches which are not bodily."

Miss Octavia nodded and moved into the room. No word did she say until they neared the gate, which was fast closed and undecipherable. "I have been hoping that the child would run in to see me again," she said then, with a troubled glance; "but the visit was such a pleasure and success until the arrival of Enid. I am sorry that it happened so. The arrival of Enid annoyed me very much. She is the most freakish creature I ever came across. Mr. Airy's married lot promises to be a thorny one."

Roden turned to her eagerly, removing his hand from the unresponsive gate and ignoring it.

absorption the latter part of her speech. "She was almost her old self; she laughed—you heard her, didn't you? She told me the day before that she had quite got out of the way of laughing, and it was good to hear her. She looked stronger—don't you think so? You can almost imagine what she used to be."

"It is a dear little face," said Miss Octavia, turning her eyes away from Roden's glance of anxious pride; "beautiful in its way, and even better than beautiful. I could love her dearly myself."

"Some day, please God, you'll have the opportunity," said Roden, almost reverently.

And then, just as they paused at the stile where she had first spoken to Hester, Miss Octavia laid her hand on his arm. "My dear, don't hope too much."

Roden's lips took their most obstinate curve. "I mean to hope," he replied, looking across the wide stretch of stubble which sloped away to meet the line of grey sky; "I mean to hope. If I did not, I couldn't stay here. It isn't a hopeful prospect *now*, I grant you, but I believe in time she would care; she shall, if I can only get the opportunity to see her oftener."

Miss Octavia smoothed his sleeve, where her hand still lingered. "I hope she will, if it is for the best," she said quietly. "God only knows what the future holds for her and for you, Anthony, but remember,

whatever is, is best. The longer I live—and I am an old woman now—the more I see that everything in this world, hard and incomprehensible as it may seem, has its meaning, and the meaning is a good one. If it is to be, it will be, my dear, and you will have your opportunity."

The words had hardly passed her lips when a solitary figure appeared in sight at the lower end of the field, accompanied by a little white restless patch which darted in and out of the hedge. This was a favourite walk of Hester's, one that she and Jakes liked better than the others, for it led to wide stretches of wind-swept common, where in the spring great clumps of gorse gave back their gold to the sunshine.

Roden turned quickly to Miss Octavia. In an instant the day's dull hues had taken on themselves the rose-red light of hope. He watched the slender figure cross the field slowly, unaware of their presence.

"We will go back to Netherlands now, if you don't mind losing a walk. Ask her to come too. It is my opportunity."

Miss Octavia nodded; her eyes too followed Hester's movements, and she thought them listless and slow.

In spite of the freshness of the air, Hester's face had no trace of colour when she reached them; her eyes were heavy; indeed, she almost looked as if she had been through an illness.

Roden drew a sharp breath, and Miss Octavia felt little less concerned. She took Hester's hand and held it closely in her own. "My dear, how tired you look!" she exclaimed. "I am afraid Jakes has persuaded you to take too long a walk."

Roden gave a quick glance at the thin little dark grey coat which he had buttoned a few nights before, when it had owned no circlet of black on the left arm. Looking away from it, he met Hester's glance. Her face crimsoned almost painfully, leaving her, when the colour ebbed away, whiter than before.

There was an awkward pause, bridged over by Miss Octavia. "We are going to Netherlands to tea," she said; "you will come too?"

"Yes, you must," interposed Roden, to stay the very visible refusal which hovered on Hester's lips. "You remember you promised some day to come with Miss Octavia."

Hester hesitated. No one but herself realised how intensely she longed for other society than her own. There had been an intolerable, almost uncanny solitude about her walk, that solitude which comes from a troubled mind and an outlook devoid of hope.

Roden threw an appealing glance over her head in Miss Octavia's direction.

"You will come?" asked the latter. "It will do you good to rest a little. You have no engagement?"

"No," said Hester quietly—she had regained composure. "There is nothing to hurry home nothing. I should like to come, but"—she hesitated and looked down at the ground, then suddenly appealed to Miss Octavia—"but should one go to tea on the day of one's father's funeral?"

There was something so startling about the expected query, so pathetic about the pale face whose expression weariness struggled with tragedy that a throb of pity passed through Miss Octavia. For reply she took the speaker's hand and put it through her arm. "Which is the nearest way to the Netherlands, Anthony? We shall be glad to receive you."

"Suppose I go on and tell them you are coming?" said Roden, with ready tact, in spite of the astonishment created by Hester's remark. "Then you can come on slowly. One of the gates is at the end of the road, and it will bring you out close to the house."

On the way Miss Octavia said not a word, contented by kindness of touch making Hester realise her sympathy. She felt that this was no ordinary bereavement, and that consequently ordinary considerations would be out of place. Hester was in the distress of her mind uplifted for a moment by the curtain which shielded the family skeleton from the world, and Miss Octavia's heart went out to her in love and pity.

Hester too said nothing. Her eyes followed Roden's tall figure as he strode ahead, and her hand clung with desperate eagerness to the human touch of Miss Octavia. It was good to be within sight and hearing of friendly faces that afternoon, for Hester had been through a time of painful experiences, her mother having lapsed into more than her old apathy and indifference. She had resumed her work with a feverish industry almost painful to witness, and the sight had got upon Hester's nerves.

Tea was brought into the library soon after their arrival, and Hester subsided gratefully into the huge leather chair which Roden wheeled forward, and submitted to having her coat taken from her. It was inexpressibly good to be surrounded once more by care and warmth and affection, and she felt it in every fibre. Miss Octavia officiated at the tea-table, nodding to herself as Hester's colour returned and her expression grew more natural. "The child cannot go on living in this way," she said to herself; "I *must* do something. Strong measures are necessary at times, and I will even risk a rebuff again. Her face positively makes my heart ache, and what Anthony must feel"—

Roden, on the farther side of the hearth, was talking to Hester, showing her a case of miniatures. As the two heads bent together over the little

portraits, Miss Octavia sighed for what might Roden's manner was very gentle. Again he his own desires into the background, and made most of Hester's presence. It was not the kind visit he had pictured to himself many a time, but was something to have her there, to feel that had been in the room he inhabited, had rested brown head against his chair, and had for a sp been happier beneath his roof-tree.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed out hour. Hester looked up, dislodging Jakes from doze on her skirt. "I must go," she said, rising quickly; "I had no idea it was so late. It been delightful, and I wish"—she glanced round room regretfully—"I wish I could stay longer."

"Come again soon. There are dozens of things will interest you. I want to ask your advice"—

Hester broke in with a reluctant little laugh checked at the outset. "Not really," she claimed; "but I wish I could give it. Perhaps She moved away with such evident reluctance that Roden's face brightened. Miss Octavia's back turned. She was apparently absorbed in the bookshelves, and the space of the long room divided from them. Roden put out his hand and took Hester's. There is much virtue in a touch, and stirred Hester's pulses into quicker being. She looked up, met his glance, and understood.

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"One day if I ask you to stay with me always, will you, Hester?"

Slow tears welled into Hester's eyes; she looked up at him and trembled like a grief-stricken child. She shook her head. "But you must never ask me," she said incoherently, in a low tone, "for I couldn't— No, I may not. Ah! if I *only*—"

The next moment, before he realised her intention, she had put his hand for an instant to her lips and had gone swiftly to join Miss Octavia. Roden remained rooted to the spot. It was all over in a moment, his question and her answer, the quaint little caress, which might mean either love or gratitude, or just a momentary warm-hearted impulse and trouble for his sake. Roden sighed, shook himself free from the glamour that the soft touch had aroused, and realised that his guests were moving towards him. Hester had put on her coat unaided.

"Get on your own coat," said Miss Octavia, "and we can see Miss Percival to her gate on the way. He is coming unceremoniously to dine with me this evening. I wish you could come too. Why not?"

"It is out of the question, thank you," said Hester, buttoning her glove intently. There was a bright colour in her cheeks, which Miss Octavia noted with pleasure.

"The little change has done her a world of good," she remarked to Roden when the gate had closed

on Hester and they were near her own house
am determined to do something towards m:
her life a brighter one."

There was no comment on Hester's absence. Drusilla learned where she had been, and found some comfort in the thought of Miss Octavia's friendship. To her, as to Hester, there seemed hope of brighter times, and the old woman honestly troubled about many things. Hester spent the evening sewing with her mother, there was no conversation to take her thoughts away from the events of the afternoon. She went to her room early with a feeling of bewilderment, wondering if she had made her refusal clear. She lay motionless looking wide-eyed into the dark, a turmoil of feeling taking possession of her. She struggled with duty, and duty with desire, worn out by the conflicting emotions of the day, fell asleep. It seemed only a few moments before a sound awakened her, a sound which mingled with her dreams and with the wind that moaned fit round the house. She leaned upon her elbow, drowsy with sleep, and the next instant was awake to the knowledge that someone or something tore frantically at the bedclothes. With difficulty Hester stifled a cry. Then her hand came in contact with a smooth head. It was Jake's, biting and scratching at the counterpane, and fi-



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leaping upon her in a state of wild excitement, uttering a series of subdued yapping barks.

"Oh, you bad dog!" exclaimed Hester, striking a match. "How did you open the door downstairs? Drusilla must have forgotten to shut it. Go down, sir!"

But for once Jakes was deaf to her command. He leaped from the bed and ran whimpering to the door, then back to her, all with the same frantic air of haste, even fear.

Hester slipped on her dressing-gown, convinced at last that Jakes brought her news of some kind. He ran out of the door when he saw she was following, and then ran back to her, barking loudly now. A thick pall of impenetrable smoke met her on the landing, filling her lungs with acrid fumes. She groped towards her mother's room, but from that direction the smoke rolled towards her in eddying masses. Then she turned and ran with Jakes. It was clearer towards Drusilla's end of the passage. The old woman was awake and half sitting up in bed, thinking her mistress called.

"Quick, quick!" said Hester "The house is on fire, and mother"—

But when Drusilla reached the door Hester had disappeared through the smoke, and Jakes, wild with anxiety, was tugging at the old woman's skirts and barking furiously.

CHAPTER XXII

"FIRE! FIRE!"

THE smoke poured out of the bedroom in volumes, dimming Hester's vision and clouding her sense of locality. She ran back to her own room, choking sensation in her throat, and caught one of the towels dipped it into the jug and wrapped it round her mouth. The next moment she ran across again to her mother's room, groping her way to the entrance. Blinded by the smoke, she could not feel every inch of her way, and on entering the room struck her elbow violently against the lintel. Such a shock as was the blow, it braced her. Bending her head she groped her way almost on hand and knees across the room, for unfortunately Percival's bed was placed at the far end near the window. The atmosphere almost choked her through the dull glare she crept in the darkness where her mother lay. But for the acute pain in her arm she might have imagined herself in a nightmare; her head swam, and her movements

through the heat and sharp crackle of burning wood became almost mechanical.

“I must reach her,” she repeated to herself, “I *must* reach her! Poor mother! O God, let me be in time, quite in time!”

Every step she took seemed more difficult than the last. She had lost her way irretrievably, and her mother— The hot and glowing surroundings darkened as in a mist. She put out her hand and touched some piece of furniture; it was the table beside the bed. The glass upon it, containing the sleeping draught, fell with a tinkle to the ground, and Hester slipped to the floor with it, a smothering sensation overpowering her. Then an eager tongue, warm and quivering with excitement, touched her face. It was Jakes, faithful Jakes, anxious for her safety. Hester put out her hand towards him, filled with fresh courage. She dragged herself a few inches farther along the floor, and the next moment her fingers came in contact with the bedpost, and then passed up to the bed. There was the sickening smell of burning cloth and feathers. The very quilt was on fire; the eider-down had slipped blazing to the ground on the far side. A quivering tongue of flame crept up and darted across the pillow as Hester put out her hands. She wanted to call out, to shriek to her mother. She was smothering with the wet mass of linen

round her mouth. But there was no movement from the bed. The tongue of flame grew bolder, stretching out more determinedly for its prey.

Jakes gave a short, muffled bark that was half a choke, and pulled at his mistress's skirt. Hester closed her eyes to shut out the ache and the glare, and just as the tongue of fire—stronger now—darted up for the third time she drew her mother from the bed to the ground, lowering her gently with all the strength of which her arms were capable. The far end of the room was by this time a glowing mass of flame, and the heat made Hester's brain reel. Again Jakes uttered his stifled bark and crept towards the door, and little by little Hester followed in his direction, dragging, rather than carrying, her mother with her across the floor. Mrs. Percival, in her unconscious condition, was a sheer weight, in spite of her fragility. Then Hester heard a voice calling at the door; it was Drusilla groping her way in, thinking herself even then too late to save either. Stooping, she bent and with apparent ease carried her mistress's light figure down the passage, away from the worst of the smoke. There came all the noise and bewilderment of the flames from the distance, a hissing, resistless force as the fire gained rapid hold of the inflammable materials of the old house, causing it to blaze like matchwood.

Hester slipped the bandage away from her mouth. The window on the landing was open a little, and while the wind eddied in, aiding and abetting the flames, it yet served to bring them a clear, fresh current from the outer world. The breeze swept across Hester's scorched face and hands like a benediction, and Jakes trotted towards it and down the stairs. Hester looked at Drusilla where she knelt on the ground beside her mistress chafing the limp hands.

“We must get her away, right out of the house.” As she spoke, Hester glanced fearfully down the passage. “See, Drusilla, how the flames are gaining. In the garden, at least, we shall be safe.”

Drusilla's whole body was still quivering with the relief and joy of seeing them again. She bent anxiously to listen for Mrs. Percival's breathing, then shook her head. “The cold outside will kill her,” she said.

Hester's eyes followed the course of the flames. A moment or two before they had not been visible from that point; now she could see them issuing from her mother's room and darting almost across the passage. Hastening into her own room, she caught up her warm skirt and coat, a blanket or two from the bed, and a travelling rug. Then, putting the blanket over her mother, she spread the rug round Drusilla, who was, like herself, only partially clad.

"Just a few seconds," said Hester, with breathless haste, slipping on her coat and skirt, and then with Drusilla's aid putting her own warm dressing-gown round her mother. "Drusilla, I am so afraid for you; wait an instant."

Again she ran to her own room, still tolerably free from the fire, and caught up some stockings for both, and a heavy cloak. The smoke was growing denser as she returned, for the fire spread with inconceivable rapidity. She threw the thick golf cape round Drusilla and made her put on the stockings, though the old woman protested.

"Now between us, quickly," said Hester, "let us take her into the garden. There is nothing else to do, Drusilla, and no time to lose. Oh, *do* be quick! and then I can go for help. So far the fire—why in the world does no one see it and come?"

She stopped suddenly, as from the hall below a light shot out, illuminating the surroundings and making them bright as day. The fire had reached the sitting-room, fanned into rapid action by the wind which circled round the house in gusts, even the height of the garden wall acting as insufficient protection. Drusilla looked up half dazed, as Hester leaned over the banisters and realised that the crazy old house was doomed. Without more hesitation she went back and put her hand on Drusilla's shoulder, shaking her with gentle insistence.

“In another moment we shall not be able to cross the hall,” she said. “Help me, Drusilla; we must save her and ourselves, now, this minute, and I can’t lift her by myself.”

Drusilla rose slowly to her feet and glanced for an instant at the immovable face on the ground, stooping and putting aside the white locks with fingers that shook a little. She never doubted that her mistress was dead.

“Now,” said Hester.

Between them they carried Mrs. Percival down-stairs and towards the hall door, where Jakes stood waiting for them. Something fell at Hester’s feet as she unbarred the door, and she picked it up, putting it into the pocket of her coat without glancing to see what it was. After the heat of the house the sharp current of air made them shiver. Once in the hall they rolled the blankets round the quiet figure, whose immovability began to frighten Hester. “She must have fainted,” she said, glancing round; “and there is nothing to give her—nothing.”

Drusilla was chafing the limp hands, but her efforts met with no response.

“There’s the little tool shed,” said Hester; “at least, that will be out of the way of this bitter wind. Then I will run for help. This place is so isolated; you’d think they *must* see the glare, even from the village below.”

"They're all in bed long since," said Drusilla, as they went slowly along the path; "there's only the big house could see, and the wall here shuts us in. There, Miss Hester, run for help; put this round you. You're only half clothed, and you'll catch your death of cold."

Hester shook her head, and wrapped the cloak more closely round Drusilla's shoulders, glancing down at her mother's unconscious face. "I have a warm coat and skirt," she said; "nothing matters so long as we can make someone hear. She can't lie out here all night."

"You go along, my dear." Drusilla's tone was brisker as the shock and bewilderment passed away. But her strong features worked in the glow from the fire as she realised that now they were homeless indeed.

Hester paused for a moment, struck by a new fear. "She is not—Drusilla, she is not—?"

Drusilla shook her head; there were no tears in her eyes as she bent over the motionless figure. "I can't say, Miss Hester, I can't say. Maybe it's a long faint."

The next moment Hester had run along the garden path and out at the gate. She had only bedroom slippers on her feet, and though warm they were not made for speed. Once, indeed, she slipped on a sharp stone, and that on the right foot flew

away towards the hedge. It was Jakes who retrieved it for her, coming back with it in his mouth, and by his help and companionship giving her courage again. There was only a moon at intervals when it struggled from behind the heavy masses of cloud, and the wind roared in her ears, shaking the tree-tops and depriving her of breath. It was full in her face one moment, at her back the next, blowing her hair wildly about her eyes and buffeting her, as if determined to frustrate her efforts. At the gate of Netherlands she paused for an instant. It was nearer than Miss Octavia's; he might be up. Surely, surely some instinct ought to have warned him of their danger. Then she turned and sped on again, the idea dismissed from her mind. Miss Octavia was strong too. Hester's thoughts went back to the shrewd, kindly face with a comforting sense of security.

The gate was heavy, she could hardly push it open with both hands, but in another moment it clashed behind her, and she followed Jakes, a little white speck in the darkness, towards the hall door. To her infinite surprise and relief, lights still burned in the house—indeed, at that moment Roden was uttering departing regrets to his hostess in the hall.

“I never go to bed early,” said Miss Octavia, “so you need not apologise. For some reason country hours do not appeal to me. Moderation in all

things, Anthony, even in uprising and going to rest. In the summer, I grant you"— She threw up her head and listened. "What was that?"

"Was there a sound? I think not," remarked Roden, putting out his hand towards his overcoat. "This is such a stormy night one can hardly distinguish anything. We are having the gales early."

But Miss Octavia's attention wandered. "I thought I heard a knock, but it must have been my mistake; no, there it is again."

"I heard it that time," remarked Roden. "Surely they don't come to you so late? Listen," as Miss Octavia shook her head and moved towards the door, "that was almost like a dog's bark." Jakes had not yet recovered from the effects of the smoke. As the door swung open Hester fell against it. With her wind-blown, uncovered head and white face Miss Octavia hardly knew her, but Roden put out his arm and caught her as she swayed towards him. For an instant her head fell forward against his coat, her eyes closed, and everything grew dim and indistinct.

Roden held her to him almost fiercely. What had they been doing to her that she should look like this? A mighty wrath swept over him, rendering him speechless, that and the sense that she clung to him as if for help and shelter.

CHAPTER XXIII

SANCTUARY

IT was Miss Octavia who regained her composure first. Roden made no effort to move, only passing his hand gently to and fro over the brown head, with an expression on his features that was very far from gentle. The wind swept in at the open door, causing the lamp to sway and flicker. Time and surroundings had faded from Roden's mind. He was registering a vow that she should not go back ; Miss Octavia would give her sanctuary until— But Hester struggled against the faintness and dimness of vision, drawing herself away and putting her hair from her eyes. Miss Octavia with some difficulty herself shut out the elements, realising from a glance at Roden's face that those equally fierce burned within. "Bring her to the fire," she said in a low voice ; "she looks perished with cold and quite faint, poor child. Get some brandy ; no, I will—of course you do not know where to find it."

But Hester resisted when Roden tried to lead her towards the warmly-lighted room. "No, no, I

am not going to faint," she exclaimed, still clinging to him and impelling him towards the hall door. "I must not, there's no time; the house is on fire. There's not a moment to lose, I tell you." Her hands gripped his arm with surprising strength.

"Your mother, is she safe?" asked Miss Octavia, in a horrified tone. "Oh, Anthony, what is to be done? Rouse your men; they may be able to save the house and valuables. Quick!"

"There is not the slightest hope of saving the house," said Hester more collectedly, putting her hand across her eyes; "the wind has been too strong. Mother is in the garden with Drusilla, and our belongings are of no value. There are so few things. We should all have been burned in our beds if it had not been for Jakes."

Jakes, who was sitting anxiously on the alert, wagged his tail at the sound of his name, and flicked one ear. The other hung limply down, having been singed in the flames; but Jakes, intrepid watch-dog, knew this was no time for self-commiseration. Time enough to attend to his ills when the family rested in safety. Hester, too, though her hand and arm were badly scorched, felt no pain until later. Roden had relinquished her to Miss Octavia, and was hastening away without coat or hat. But Miss Octavia, the ever-watchful, called him back. "Put on your coat, Anthony," she said; "but wait one

moment." She ran upstairs as lightly as a girl and returned with a heavy cloak. "Now run," she said. "Never mind the house; bring them here, there's plenty of room. No, no, Hester; you must not go back. Anthony will manage, with the help of your maid."

She almost pushed him out, Jakes following close upon his steps, and shut the door, while Hester listened for a moment until the gate clanged heavily behind him. Then for the first time she realised the acute pain of her burns.

Miss Octavia put her arm round her guest and led her towards the sanctum, placing her in an easy-chair. Then she threw on fresh logs and seized the bellows, only to drop them hastily as Hester's head fell against the chair-back.

When the latter recovered consciousness she found Miss Octavia bending over her with a restorative. Hester's face was so terribly wan that Miss Octavia felt anxious, chafing her guest's fingers with her own capable hands. Hester winced as they touched her burns. Then she suddenly started to her feet. "Where are they? Has he come back? Let me go. Something worse may have happened."

Thoroughly unstrung, she grew almost incoherent. Miss Octavia pushed her back gently into the chair. "Anthony is quite to be trusted to do the best," she said, so quietly that Hester subsided. "Sit still,

dear, while I go and rouse the maids. They will hardly be asleep yet. There is much to be done—fires to light"— She paused as Hester looked up at her, a world of gratitude in her eyes. " You know, surely, how glad I am to welcome you as guests." She put a stray lock away from Hester's cheek, and then stooped and kissed the place where it had been.

" Ah, how good you are!" Hester's eyes clouded over. " But you don't know; mother looked so dreadful, as if she were dead. Even Drusilla thought so. And I prayed so hard to save her."

" Perhaps the shock made her faint," said Miss Octavia. " We must do all we can, and you know I am almost equal to a doctor in an emergency. Stay quietly here and get warm, while I go up to the maids."

Time seemed long until Roden's return. Hester sat in the arm-chair with hands clasped tightly together, once more oblivious to her burns, every sense quickened to high tension. From the upper part of the house came the sounds of bustle and movement, as Miss Octavia and her willing hand-maids prepared the rooms for the unexpected guests. A fire soon blazed in the large room, and in the smaller chintz-bedecked chamber destined for Hester. And even in the midst of the turmoil Miss Octavia found space to marvel at the unexpected

happenings of life; to note how, without any movement on her part, Hester's lot had been cast in with her own.

She returned to the sitting-room after a time and glanced out of the window. Then she went to the hearth, where Hester sat with her hands tightly clasped. Her eyes seemed to be the biggest part of her face, and Miss Octavia liked her looks less than before.

"They are a long time," Hester said, rising and moving restlessly towards the door. "There is not a sound; even the wind seems to have dropped. I wish I had gone back. Listen!" She threw up her head straining for the sounds, but Miss Octavia made no motion.

"It seems long, but Anthony must have had some difficulty, and waiting is always wearisome."

Hester suddenly paused beside her. "I have just been thinking," she said slowly, knitting her brows, "that we have nothing now. At all events, we managed to live, and to have a roof over us before, and clothes to put on"—she glanced down at her skirt. "Of course, I know nothing of our means, or where the money comes from that we live on; and it seems only fair to tell you that—that—I don't know."

Miss Octavia took her by the shoulders and shook her gently, her strongly-marked features

wearing an expression half humorous, half pathetic. "My dear, I am only waiting to welcome your mother in safety to sing a *pæan* over the burning of your home. Since you say there are no valuables to be destroyed, I have come to the conclusion that the fire has solved a problem which has troubled me profoundly since we met this afternoon; the fire has indeed saved me from the stigma of meddlesomeness. Unsympathetic as you may think me, I rejoice to hold you in durance vile for the present." She ended with a final shake, and dropped her hands from Hester's shoulders.

The latter took them again in her own. "I'm glad too," she said. "There seemed no way out. Drusilla said so only this evening. I grew to hate it—the solitude, the mystery. It would have seemed less hard to bear in a town than here, where everyone"— She put up her head suddenly and listened.

There were sounds outside. Roden had returned at last. It was a curious little procession that filed into the hall—Roden first, with Mrs. Percival in his arms, followed closely by Drusilla, clad in a strange medley of garments; while behind came Jakes, glad to have his family collected once more under one roof-tree. After carrying Mrs. Percival up to the room set apart for her, Roden left her in charge of Miss Octavia and Drusilla. The latter had

walked beside him all the way, silently suiting her step to his own ; for his progress was slow, despite the fact that his burden was a light one. He had suggested carrying Mrs. Percival in preference to waiting for a conveyance, and Drusilla had gratefully assented. During the anxious period of waiting she had ascertained that her mistress was alive, but there was little sign of consciousness, and Mrs. Percival seemed quite oblivious to what was taking place around her.

Hester hovered outside the bedroom, looking in at the half-open door, even now unable to shake herself free from the sensation that she was not wanted near her mother. Here in a few moments Miss Octavia found her.

"I think it would be well to send for the doctor," she said. "Perhaps Anthony could go, or could rouse one of his men. Unfortunately, Simon sleeps in the village. Will you tell him, Hester? I do not like to take the responsibility ; her case may be serious."

Drusilla was moving about the room, still clad in her varied garments, with no thought beyond her mistress. When she had crossed the threshold Miss Octavia's glance had met hers, and each had recognised in the other the kinship of a soul which has suffered and gained strength from adversity.

Hester went downstairs slowly, half reluctant to

ask more of Roden. He was standing on the hearthrug, his eyes fixed upon the door. His face lost its tension as she came in, stooping on her way to pat Jakes, who lay on the carpet weary with good deeds.

"Poor little chap, his ear is badly scorched," said Roden, coming forward and taking her hand. "He won't let me touch it, though I offered to doctor it. Why, I believe"—his quick eyes noting that she had winced ever so slightly at his touch—"that you are scorched too." He drew her nearer to the lamplight and looked with a frown at her wrist, where an angry red patch spread downward towards the fingers.

"Don't, please don't; it's nothing," exclaimed Hester, putting it quickly behind her. "I never noticed it until long afterwards." She ended with a laugh that was more than half a sob, quivering under his glance with a strange mingling of pain and fearfulness and delight.

"You are to go for a doctor, please," she said, her hand still behind her back. "Miss Octavia told me to ask you to go or to send. You must be so tired, too."

Roden's voice, like her own, shook a little. "I am nearly as clever as Miss Octavia at dressing wounds," he said. "Outside there's one of the men from the railway going home, and he will take the

message to the doctor. I asked him to wait in case he was wanted. You won't vanish while I tell him?"

On his return she was still standing where he had left her, her head down-bent, her hand behind her. He rifled Miss Octavia's medicine cupboard, finding oil and wool, and a little bandage wherewith to hide from view the scorched hand.

Hester submitted to his ministrations dreamily, watching the strong brown fingers doing their work of first aid to the injured.

"Now you must go to bed at once," he said quietly, when all was in place.

"Yes," said Hester obediently, glancing up at him for the first time. And then—she never quite knew how it happened—instead of going she crept with a tired sigh into the arms held out to her.

There was silence in the room for a moment or two. Jakes, the only onlooker, gave a little sigh in his turn, and curling himself nearer the hearth, went to sleep, feeling that now indeed all was well with the world. After a time Hester drew herself away gently, but with infinite resolution. Roden retained her hand, the unbandaged member, and she made no effort to take it away. The firelight glanced among the loose tendrils of her hair, and shone, too, on the tears in her eyes. Roden, realising that she was overwrought by the events of the

night, said nothing, but his clasp tightened on her fingers. She drew a little closer again, putting her bandaged hand against his shoulder.

"I am sorry," she said, in a low tone. "It was not right, because—because—oh, you remember what I told you before, that day"—she did not realise that it was only a few hours ago—"that I could never"—She glanced up at him appealingly. His face was determined, even stern, for he too had been through storm and stress and dread of what might have been. Always simple and direct in his ways, he went straight to the point now. "Tell me one thing, Hester—do you love me? Only a little yet, perhaps, but enough to be happy with me?"

Hester's face grew very pale. "Not a little," she said, with equal directness, "but with all my heart."

Roden stooped and kissed her. "Then nothing else matters."

Hester put out a small protesting hand. "But I must tell you," she said, "or you will go home expecting things—hoping"—

Roden's face broke into a very tender smile. "I certainly shall," he remarked. "Now I *must* let you go, I suppose. Tell me to-morrow. Let me expect and hope to-night."

Hester suddenly turned and clung to him desperately. "Sometimes I feel that nothing can come

between us," she said passionately. "Say that you think nothing can—*say* it."

"Please God nothing ever shall," Roden said solemnly. Then he took her face between his hands. "Hester, do you realise what it would have been to me if I had lost you to-night? Do you not understand that to me you represent *everything*? That you are all I have in the world to love, that you *are* my world?"

Hester looked back at him for a long, unwavering moment, then her hands went round his neck, and standing on tiptoe she kissed him of her own accord. The next instant he found himself alone.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GRACE WE SAY

HESTER crept upstairs to her mother's room, pausing outside the door to collect her scattered faculties. She was so accustomed to repress all sign of happiness in her mother's presence that now she lingered before entering. She leaned for a moment over the banisters, looking down at the hall below, and at the bright light thrown from the room where Roden, equally content, still lingered.

"It may be all over to-morrow," said Hester to herself. "To-morrow he must know the story, the disgrace, everything about us, and perhaps it will come between. And then there is the promise. But he said I was all he had, and that nothing should make any difference."

Argue with herself as she might, she could not check the gladness which quivered in every fibre, and, giving up the attempt, she went quietly into Mrs. Percival's room. Miss Octavia stood near the hearth, while Drusilla, clad now in one of Miss Octavia's longest gowns, which was still too short

for her, and a spacious white apron, hovered near the bed.

Miss Octavia glanced up and motioned Hester towards the door, closing it after her. "My dear, you must go to bed at once," she said. "It is quite the small hours, and your eyes are the biggest part of you." She put out her hand to draw Hester towards a door which stood ajar on the opposite side of the corridor, and for the first time noticed the bandage. "You were burned, and I did not know it!" she exclaimed. "No wonder you grew faint! How did you manage?"

Hester's colour came and went. "Anthony bound it up for me a few minutes ago," she said. "He insisted upon doing it, and he helped himself to your possessions."

Miss Octavia's face never moved a muscle. She examined the bandage closely. "H'm," she said briefly; "couldn't have done it better myself. Where did Anthony learn bandaging, I wonder? Perhaps it was an inspiration born of the occasion." She patted Hester's arm reassuringly, and led her into the room set apart for her.

"How pretty!" exclaimed Hester, taking in the dainty room at a glance, with its simplicity and refinement and those accessories from which at home she had been debarred so long. The firelight shone on the flowered chintz and the brass of the

bedstead, on the well-stocked little bookcase and the hundred odds and ends which went to make the harmony of the whole.

"There's everything you can want to-night, at all events." Miss Octavia was pacing the room slowly, with a hospitable eye alert for any deficiencies. "And I have drawn up a plan of campaign for to-morrow. There is no doubt that you must stay in bed until we can get you something to wear. Yes, yes, of course," as Hester began to protest; "and I have arranged that Emily—the housemaid, and such a reliable girl—shall take an early train to town with a list of things that will at least tide you over to the time when you can come with me and choose what you would like. Now, not another word; into bed with you, and I will come in again later to find if you are really snug."

And before another word could be uttered she had gone. Hester lay in bed half dreaming, half uneasy, watching the firelight flicker on the walls and furniture, and starting up nervously now and then, fearing a repetition of the events of a few hours before. Miss Octavia presently made her reappearance, bearing in her hand a glass which contained something very delightful which Hester was too tired to analyse. Then she tucked the bedclothes round her guest, and turned to go; but Hester held her fast, and Miss Octavia stooped and kissed her,

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putting back the straying locks with very gentle fingers.

"It is the first time I have ever been tucked in," Hester smiled, but her lips were quivering; "and to-night—to-night—I want a real mother so badly"—she drew Miss Octavia closer still—"because—because—Anthony"—

The incoherent whisper went to Miss Octavia's heart. She smoothed the hot brow more gently still, sitting on the side of the bed with the candle-stick in her hand. "I understand," she said. "You must be very good to him, Hester. He is my dear lad, and I shall love the woman who makes his happiness. You are a very fortunate child, and"—Miss Octavia smiled with the ghost of her whimsical expression, for tears—the slow, unaccustomed tears of one who weeps but seldom—were coursing down her face—"and he is not to be greatly sympathised with, I think." She put down the candlestick hastily as Hester sat upright with shining eyes.

"But I thought you would disapprove," she said, "because there is"—she broke off—"so much to explain. It may stand between us, and if you think it should, if he does, I will agree to go straight out of his life. Do you know," she laid a burning palm on Miss Octavia's wrist, "I am afraid, *afraid* to be happy. I think all the trouble—the strain—has broken my nerve. Yes, I'm quite afraid."

Miss Octavia took note of the brightness of the large eyes and the transparent colour. She rose, her practical self once again. "Now, my dear, I shall have you ill on my hands if you do not go to sleep this moment. Put away all your anxieties; remember they are in far higher hands than ours; and never let me hear you say that you are afraid to be happy. Whenever you feel that pessimistic way inclined, think of the quaint little couplet which says—

"It is a comely fashion to be glad,
Joy is the grace we say to God."

She stooped, kissed her visitor, tucking the bed-clothes round her once again, and went out of the room, leaving Hester with a sensation of sudden heart's-ease and well-being. So true it is that a few words can change the current of our thoughts. She closed her eyes drowsily, repeating the words to herself over and over again, living once more those few wonderful moments with Roden, and finally sinking into the blessed oblivion of sleep to the accompaniment of the words—"Joy is the grace—the grace—we say—to God"—

Twice during the night Miss Octavia stole in to see how she fared, and found her sleeping quietly, with an expression of absolute contentment on her face.

"I think it will be well with Anthony." Miss Octavia recklessly shut her eyes now to the fact that

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in the sight of the world he was making no great match ; that with money and lands and other treasures on earth he might do better than marry into a family under a cloud. In spite of her shrewdness, Miss Octavia's views were old-fashioned in the main and romantic. Yet she sighed a little as she turned to go, with a stirring of curiosity as to the history of these guests so strangely assembled under her roof-tree.

It was very late in the day when Hester awoke. Miss Octavia's visits had not disturbed her, and she came back by slow degrees to the consciousness of her surroundings, gazing with half-awake, puzzled glance at the unaccustomed furniture, and asking herself why the walls should have bloomed in one night to sudden glory, when only a few short hours before they had been drab and unbeautiful in hue. She was still only half awake when Miss Octavia's face at the door brought her back to the present with speed. Miss Octavia nodded and disappeared, to return before long with a small tray. She stood near Hester and made her eat her breakfast. "But I am not used to being waited on, and I haven't had breakfast in bed since I had measles," exclaimed Hester, in protest.

"Emily is not back yet ; until she comes you cannot get up," said Miss Octavia inflexibly. "You look much better. Drusilla can wear my gowns, but you would be lost in one of them."

"How is mother?" Hester spoke anxiously.
"Did the doctor come?"

Miss Octavia looked thoughtful. "He is rather puzzled about her as yet, and, of course, put many questions to Drusilla as to her condition before the fire occurred. He fears she may have had another stroke. Her eyes look conscious, yet she hardly seems to notice what goes on around her. We will have a further opinion later if necessary. She is taking a little nourishment. What a lovely woman she must have been once; she is painfully worn and thin now."

Hester nodded; there were tears in her eyes. From her own happiness had sprung into being an infinite pity for her mother, whose life had been wrecked so early, and with such completeness.

When Miss Octavia had left her Hester lay and pondered many things, until the former returned bearing a large parcel, and followed by Emily carrying one even larger. Though Hester sternly told herself that this was not the time for such sensations, it caused her real pleasure to survey the dainty blouses sent from town. They were black, too, and it had been an intense grief to her that Mrs. Percival had set her face against the expenditure of a farthing on mourning. She dressed herself when they had left her, slowly and with care, taking infinite pleasure in the fresh little blouse and the well-made skirt.

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“One *ought* not, I suppose,” said Hester to herself mistakenly, surveying her trim reflection in the glass; “but how good it is to see the seams in the right place, instead of straggling where they ought not. But it must be abominable of me to be glad when poor mother—when only yesterday”— She dropped suddenly on her knees near the window. “How can I help it,” she asked herself incoherently, “when he told me—*that?* I do thank God, and I mean to be glad and proud and a better woman for it, even if”—

There was a movement outside, a sound which took Hester back to the cottage, now a heap of ruins. She rose, and going to the door, opened it. Jakes entered sedately, not at all in his customary manner, and she stooped to stroke him. To his collar was tied a large posy of violets, which filled the room with perfume. There was nothing with them, not a message beyond their own sweetness and colour; but there was no need for Jakes to look at her with his head on one side in a ridiculously inquiring way as she tucked them into her blouse. Then he curled himself up on a little downy chair near the window until she should be ready.

Hester took up her coat from the chair where it lay, and shook it before hanging it in the wardrobe. As she did so something fell from it to the floor, scattering several objects to the far corners of the room.

"What in the world can it be?" exclaimed Hester, stooping. "I don't remember putting anything in my pocket."

There at her feet was the little old-fashioned bag which Mrs. Percival always carried on her wrist. For the past two years, at all events, it had never left her care. Hester now remembered that she had thrust something into her pocket after the fire broke out. She picked up the bag over which, after so long a period, her mother's vigilance had ceased, and then she went to collect its scattered contents. A bundle of letters lay in one corner bound together with a faded pale blue ribbon. On one a signature stood out beyond the band of blue—"Cynthia." Without another glance, Hester put the packet into the bag and went to seek further. Against her will she was violating her mother's dearest and most secret possessions, and she felt half impelled to close her eyes as she replaced the contents of the bag. There was a little silver thimble in another corner, a childish thing of fairylike proportions, with a small dint in the side. Hester wondered if that too had been Cynthia's long ago. Then she came to another little packet, which fell asunder as she raised it, revealing three photographs. Hester looked down at them where they lay upon the floor, a puzzled frown contracting her brow. One, at all events, seemed curiously familiar. Stooping, she

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picked them up slowly one by one. Cynthia, Cynthia, and again Cynthia was inscribed in her mother's writing under each. Cynthia a child, Cynthia a girl with hair curling to her waist. Hester remembered both in a mist of recollection. The third Cynthia was a tall and lovely girl, strangely like someone else. Hester caught her breath sharply. She turned the beautiful pictured face to the light, in order to be quite sure, then read the name again, putting it away from her with a sudden feeling of aversion and sick disbelief. It could not be, yet—She took up the photographs hastily as a knock came to the door, and Miss Octavia entered in search of her.

CHAPTER XXV

RECOGNITION

IT was very silent in the sickroom. Drusilla sat beside the fire, her hands folded idly in her lap. Her face looked worn and sad, for the doctor had only just left, and his report had been disquieting. Drusilla had hardly expected a more hopeful outlook, yet she mourned none the less for a life blighted in its prime, a life whose opening years had contained so much of promise and prosperity.

The old woman's heart burned within her, and slow tears gathered, but were thrust back. She rose, listened to the quiet breathing of the invalid, and returned to her seat. Hester came stealing in on tiptoe. "Let me stay here a little," she said, in a low tone. "Go and rest, Drusilla; you will only wear yourself out, and then what would become of us? Mother is quiet now, and perhaps will not notice that you are away." She knelt down on the rug and laid her hand on Drusilla's. But the latter shook her head and glanced from the bed to Hester's

face, where her searching gaze discerned a mingling of happiness and doubt, rest and unrest.

For the past two days, even in the midst of much trouble, Hester had been curiously, restlessly happy in the love and thought which lapped her round. Yet with it all was an underlying sense of a secret that could be shared with no one, because of a want of full conviction.

Drusilla suddenly put her hand on Hester's shoulder, turning her a little so that the firelight fell full on her face. "*You're* happy, at anyrate, my lamb," she whispered, almost fiercely; "*you're* going to be happy. You couldn't fail to be with him. Why, I thank God every time I see him looking at you, my dear."

Hester glanced up with eyes that shone. "And so do I," she said, in a low tone; "it's so wonderful, Drusilla—too beautiful even to talk about."

Drusilla's hand dropped again to her knee. "Yes," she said slowly, looking into the flames, "it's well that one out of the family should be happy. And you deserve it, my lamb, for keeping to her in time of trouble, not like—the other." Her eyes gleamed in her worn face. Hester drew back half fascinated, then moved a little closer.

"Don't, Drusilla. What is the use of speaking like that? Perhaps, somewhere, she is sorry"—

"*Sorry!*" interposed Drusilla. "Sorry! She'll

sup sorrow for it yet. That's her work," extending her arm towards the bed, "her work more than the money worries. If you knew what I know, Miss Hester, you'd think the same. She broke her mother's heart, and one day, God willing, I'll tell her of it. The letter she sent, my dear—the selfish, cruel letter. It broke her heart, poor dear, as no money worries, even the worst, ever could. She made an idol of Miss Cynthia, and suffered for it, as we all do, as we all do."

Hester said nothing. There was a murmuring sound from the bed, and Drusilla hastened across. After a moment or two all grew quiet once more, and she returned to her place.

"Sometimes I think she's forgotten the past two years, Miss Hester; she talks about things that happened long before then—when you were babies—and then about Miss Cynthia coming out. She'd planned her frock long before, and—and—the pearl necklace she was to wear." Drusilla's voice grew tremulous. "It was almost the first thing sold when the crash came—gathered up for her one by one, year by year, meaning the giving up of something the mistress wanted herself. But the pearls must be of the best, a good match. She was talking of those pearls fit to break your heart all last night, and begging for Cynthia to come—Cynthia, Cynthia. She's quieter

now, but I believe she'd die easier if Miss Cynthia came."

Hester knelt silently on the hearthrug.

"Yes, it has always been Cynthia, never *Hester*," she said then, and in her tone there was no trace of bitterness. "If—suppose I could ever find Cynthia?"

Drusilla shook her head. "She won't be wanting her much longer, it seems to me"— She broke off with a sigh. "It's no use, Miss Hester, to meet trouble half way, but the doctor says it may be days or it may be months, and Miss Octavia, kind as she is"—

Hester's face grew brighter. "Isn't she good, Drusilla? But he—Mr. Roden—says there is plenty of room at Netherlands for us all. Mother is to live with us, and, of course, you always, Drusilla."

Miss Octavia came into the room at that moment.

"Anthony wants you to give him some tea," she said to Hester. "Run down, dear. Drusilla must have hers in a few minutes, and I will act nurse."

Hester nodded and smiled. But before she went downstairs she slipped into her own room, and took another glance at the photographs in the little wrist-bag. A sudden impulse caused her to slip the ribbon round her arm instead of replacing the bag on the chest of drawers, and it swung to and fro as she

went slowly downstairs, turning over in her mind a half-formed resolve.

Roden, who had been absent the greater part of the day, came forward to greet her. He, at all events, looked royally happy.

"Six mortal hours since I saw you last," he said presently. "I wonder if it seems half so long to you, Hester?"

Hester paused in the act of sugaring his tea and glanced at the clock. "Six hours and ten minutes exactly," she remarked. "So you see it has seemed longer. *You* never noticed the odd minutes."

Roden smiled as he took the cup from her hand. Then he inserted his fingers in his waistcoat pocket and drew out a tiny case. "Urgent business took me to town," he said, with almost boyish eagerness, placing his cup on the table, and drawing her to the couch beside him. "And I really must tell you what it was before I touch my tea. I wonder if you will like it. Guess what it is."

Hester shook her head, but her colour rose, and her eyes, large and intent, like those of an expectant child, were fixed upon the tiny leather case lying on his outstretched palm. Roden touched a spring, and with heads very close together they looked at the beautiful ring. Hester said nothing, yet Roden seemed satisfied, and there was a long silence between them which said more than many words.

"I thought at first"—Roden spoke with difficulty—"that I would give you my mother's engagement ring, and then—how superstitious you will think me!—I have heard that other people's sorrows are donned with other people's rings, so I decided against that, and went up to town. I wanted to surprise you, but I wanted, too, to ask you to choose, and, after all, I chose myself. To his dying day that jeweller will thank his stars that all engaged men are not as myself."

Hester watched the ring with bated breath. "Why?" she asked, as he paused.

"He offered his whole stock, all the jewels of Golconda, apparently—you never imagined such a raree-show, Hester; and yet, poor chap, he could not understand the reasons that stood in the way of everything he offered. Emeralds seemed too hard for little Hester, rubies too fierce; pearls meant tears, and you've had enough to last a lifetime. Then he hunted up the sapphires and diamonds, true blue, and just typical of one who has stood by her own through storm and shine."

Hester touched his arm; the glistening gems danced through a mist. "You *must* not," she exclaimed, with a sob in her voice. "You don't know how often I have grumbled at it, Anthony—hated it, and wondered why my life should be spoiled, when—when"—

“Yes?”

She turned and put her face against his like a child. “When all the time it was bringing me to —you.”

“Yes, thank God,” said Roden quietly; “and me to you, after two years’ wandering.”

He slipped the ring into place on her finger and kissed it. Hester raised her head, then placed ring and hand and arm closely round his neck.

To Roden, after a lonely and loveless life, the caress was the sweetest thing he had known, the moment too full of happiness for speech. To him, a man without ties, Hester stood for everything—father, mother, brother, sister, and home. There was no need for words, no power to use them. The firelight glanced upon the surroundings, and sent quivering sparks of light from the ring. Hester raised her head presently and came back to her surroundings with an effort.

“Oh, your tea will be quite cold,” she exclaimed, springing to her feet.

Roden smiled involuntarily and shook his head. “Not for me. You must have some fresh tea made. Don’t drink that; I’ll ring.”

He crossed the room and rang the bell, and then turned as Hester uttered an exclamation. She was holding up her hand, listening intently. “I thought I heard the sound of a motor, but I was mistaken,”

she said, in a tone of such visible relief that he looked at her in astonishment. But she was glancing into the fire with a meditative frown. Then she turned suddenly and slipped her hand into his as he joined her. "I suppose," she coloured as she spoke, "I suppose I may tell you most things now?"

Roden laughed one of his rare laughs. "I shall, of course, insist upon knowing everything," he said; "you will have no choice in the matter."

Hester smiled a little. Then her face grew very serious. She twisted the little bag on her wrist. "But this has to do with other people's affairs," she said, fumbling in the bag for a moment. "Is it taking advantage, I wonder?" she said perplexedly. "And yet I must ask you, Anthony." She drew out the packet of photographs, and held one towards him. "Does that remind you of anyone?"

Roden took it from her and bent down to bring it within range of the lamplight. "Why, of course, it is"—

The door opened, and Drusilla entered with a message from Miss Octavia. As she left the room again the parlourmaid announced, "Miss Drake."

There was a momentary pause, then Hester went forward to greet the visitor. Enid it was who seemed to feel embarrassed. In the subdued light her face looked white and unlike itself. She bowed to Roden, but her glance never left Hester's face.

"I hear your house has been burned down," she said; "they told me in the village. I trust you escaped injury?"

"Quite, thank you." Hester's tone was unresponsive. "But the shock has been too great for my mother; she is very ill." There was a quick movement from the chair where Enid had placed herself in the shadow, but Hester felt that the dark eyes were searching her face.

"Not very ill, I hope?"

"She has been an invalid for over two years," said Hester, "and the doctor gives us little hope. You see, she had a great shock at that time; she—she lost someone very dear to her, and"—Enid was leaning forward with parted lips, while Roden looked from her to Hester, puzzled beyond measure by the latter's manner—"and"—Hester's voice quivered a little—"it broke her heart."

There was silence for a moment. Enid had risen and was looking full at Hester, with a kind of proud appeal on her face. Roden stood aside, forgotten for the moment. Enid moved towards the table where lay the photograph. She looked at it, then turned and glanced at Hester, half extending her hand. But Hester involuntarily drew back, and the hand dropped again. There was a strange mingling of emotions on Enid's face. The silence in the room grew almost oppressive. Then an interruption

came. The door was opened quickly, and Drusilla stood in the aperture, the stronger light from the hall outlining her figure. She took a step into the room, her glance concentrated on Enid with a kind of fierce resentment, half grief and half determination. Enid turned, then with a swift movement covered her face with her hands. Drusilla came nearer to her, her old face set and stern. "Miss Cynthia," she said, "your mother's calling for you upstairs. *You'll not deny her now?*"

CHAPTER XXVI

CYNTHIA

THE house was very still. Over everything lay the hush that follows in the train of sickness. Outside the air was keen, the sky a dull grey, and a melancholy wind sighed through the trees, swirling the withered leaves in the garden over the paths and frozen beds.

Miss Octavia glanced from the window of her sanctum with a perplexed glance which Hester's entrance dispersed. "Well?" she asked.

Hester shook her head. "She will not come. She says she would rather not; and Drusilla positively frowns at the mere suggestion."

Miss Octavia followed Drusilla's example, and then stood on the hearthrug, looking meditatively into the sputtering logs. "Enid—I shall never be able to call her by her first name, Hester, though Cynthia she may be to you—is precisely in her griefs, as in her enjoyments, the most amazingly irrational creature I ever came across. There she sits hour after hour, morning, noon, and night too,

if she were allowed, without a thought for those adopted relations of hers who have been so good to her. Go to see them? Not she. The most frankly selfish young person, even in her trouble. And in spite of it all"—Miss Octavia thrust the little copper kettle on the fire with an irritated vigour which sent the water hissing over the logs—"one keeps a kind of liking for her, which is deplorable in view of her behaviour. I have not yet recovered from the shock, and now she is repenting so handsomely that she positively puts one in the wrong."

Hester slipped her hand through Miss Octavia's arm, and the latter turned, a very tender look mingling with the whimsical annoyance on her face. Between the two a great and ever-increasing affection had dawned; they were, as Miss Octavia had foretold, friends indeed. Every time Miss Octavia caught the gleam of blue and white fire from Hester's ring a warmth crept round her heart. In the happiness of the two beings she loved best she momentarily forgot the tragedy and ruined hopes which lay in the room above, where Enid sat beside the mother whom in adversity she had denied.

Hester gave a quick sigh. "Try as I will, I cannot think of her in the light of a sister," she said. "Perhaps in time I may grow accustomed to the idea, but so far"—she broke off abruptly—"she repels me whenever I try to make an advance.

You know"—Hester's voice grew almost apologetic—"one's sister *is* one's sister."

Miss Octavia was using the bellows with energy against the half-drowned logs. She shook her head and put them down in the chimney corner, then stroked Hester's cheek with a gentleness which as yet sat almost awkwardly upon her. "My dear," she remarked, "I sometimes question the truth of the saying, 'Blood is thicker than water.' I doubt it often, for I have seen enmity between children and parents, brother and sister, mother and daughter, father and son. Unnatural, as you say, but now and then to be seen; and a sorry sight it is, my dear, one of the saddest this world holds. A united family, with interests and hopes and fears in common, is the most beautiful thing imaginable."

Hester leaned her chin on her palm and looked deep into the heart of the fire. "And we have been so strangely divided always," she remarked, "for no especial reason that I can see." She pondered a moment longer, then leaned impulsively across to Miss Octavia, who now occupied a chair on the opposite side of the hearth. Hester's face was thoughtful, but it held none of the unhappiness of recent months. "You won't think me jealous—will you?—but it is so strange that even now, after—after everything that has passed, mother should be so much quieter and more satisfied when Cynthia is

in the room, though she has never really recognised her. She seems happier than she has been for a long time, and sometimes she smiles when Cynthia speaks to her and holds her hand. That is why Drusilla grudges every moment Cynthia is away."

Miss Octavia nodded. "She is happier because her mind has slipped two or three years of great trouble, and it will be an infinite mercy if she never remembers. She looks years younger and happier, poor, poor soul, and I can't find it in my heart to be angry with Enid, since she is so patient with her. Enid is very difficult to approach, and looks as if she were at enmity with us all. A sense of shame, no doubt."

"That is just what I think,"—Hester rose to rescue the kettle as it hissed in warning,—"and I have been racking my brain as to what would be best to do. Drusilla makes me very angry; she is so hard on Cynthia, expecting her to stay there hour after hour."

Miss Octavia measured out the tea accurately from the little enamelled caddy. "Drusilla probably considers it time your sister exerted herself," she remarked, with one of her driest smiles, "and I do not say that she is altogether wrong. Drusilla is devoted to your mother, Hester, it is quite beautiful to behold; but there is a strong touch of the heathen about her which rouses my admiration, it is so

thorough, almost barbaric. She is like an avenging fate personified to Enid."

"It surprises me," said Hester. "Drusilla has always been so good to me—so unselfish in every way. But to Cynthia she is positively inexorable."

Miss Octavia sipped her tea and said not a word until she was ready for another cup. This she poured out for herself, then moved with it in her hand towards the door. "I will face Drusilla's wrath and send Enid down for some tea," she remarked. "Find a way to get round her, Hester; never mind a rebuff. She is simply wretched and ashamed, not really disagreeable, and if you could be friends it would simplify matters greatly."

Left to herself, Hester put her cup of tea aside, and with hurrying pulses waited. She heard Miss Octavia ascend the stairs slowly, and then all movement in the house seemed suddenly to cease.

Miss Octavia went quietly into the sickroom. Enid was there alone, still sitting by the bedside immovable, with eyes that looked far beyond the wall in front of her. One hand lay on the bed, the other on her knee sent out many-coloured flashes of fire in the dim light. Miss Octavia was almost beside her before she glanced round, and even then her thoughts seemed to return slowly to her surroundings.

She looked up questioningly, and though some of

the brilliance of her colouring had faded, and there were dark rings round her eyes, her beauty struck Miss Octavia afresh. She drew Enid towards the hearth, where on the mantelshelf she had deposited her cup of tea. "Go down and have some tea," she said; "you look so tired."

Enid made a motion of dissent and glanced into the fire with half-averted head, but Miss Octavia saw that tears were not far from her eyes.

"I insist," said Miss Octavia, laying a kindly, but imperative, hand on her arm. "You are tired, and will come back to the nursing all the fresher for a little respite."

Enid turned her head away still farther, and then, as if the struggle were too much, she dropped her forehead against the mantelshelf.

"My dear, don't." Miss Octavia's tone grew more cordial. "She is quieter, better, and the doctor said only this morning that she might, with care, be spared to us a little longer."

Enid raised a face which suddenly looked drawn and old. "A year perhaps," she said, "perhaps a month, and a lifetime would not be long enough to atone. Nothing, *nothing* can ever make up for my treatment of her. It was I who broke her heart, whitened her hair, and shortened her days. Every word she says, every look is like a stab."

"Hush, hush!" Miss Octavia's eyes were misty

as she glanced towards the bed. "She may hear and grow disturbed. She is happier than she has been for many a day, and there we must let it rest. She does not know now that you left her; she is full of plans for you, and please God she will never know. Go down to Hester and have some tea."

Enid went slowly from the room without another word. Miss Octavia took her place beside the bed, knitting in hand. Enid went more slowly still downstairs. She shrank from intercourse with Hester. To face her own was infinitely harder than to meet a stranger, and she hesitated at the half-open door.

Hester stood up eagerly, her face flushing a little. Then she smiled and wheeled a chair forward. "I've just rung for some fresh tea," she said, fingering the cups and saucers on the tray; "you must want some after such hours upstairs."

Enid said nothing; her eyes were bright and rather hard. She took up a hand-screen to shade them from the light, feeling in every fibre that oceans of distance rolled between her and Hester. When tea was brought in Hester waited upon her, bringing her cake and bread and butter. But Enid shook her head, struggling against a swelling in her throat.

Hester carefully refrained from looking at her, merely placing the plates on a little table near the

couch where Enid sat. The latter stared into the fire for a moment or two, then with a swift movement turned and buried her head in the cushions. The next moment Hester was beside her. "Don't, please don't; you—you have done her so much good already."

"That makes it worse"—Enid spoke with apparent irrelevance—"when you think of the time I have left her. She doesn't know that I did, her memory is a blank, but"—Hester felt the burning touch of Enid's hand on her wrist—"but when she does—when it all comes back?"

"But it will not," said Hester. "The doctor says she has had another stroke, poor mother, and that she will in all probability never recollect the unhappy times, or even the fire. She remembers you, Cynthia, because it's years ago, and she is happier when you are in the room than anyone, even Drusilla."

Enid turned quickly. "Even you, Hester?"

"Oh no, she—she has never cared much. I don't mind, as I used"—

Enid sat erect and put her hair from her eyes with a rapid gesture that resembled Hester's. "It's not fair," she said impetuously; "no, it isn't fair. It is I she ought to turn from, poor, poor mother, not you who stayed with her."

"So long as she is happy, we need not worry," said Hester; "and"—she glanced at Enid's beauti-

ful averted profile—"we can be friends, can't we? I've so often thought about you, wondered what you were doing."

Enid gave a momentary glance at the speaker, then turned away again, her features quivering. "I was—enjoying myself all the time," she said. "They gave me everything—travel, change, amusement, balls, carnivals, frocks, jewels, money. I did not *choose* to think, but all the time I knew; somewhere deep down in what remained of a conscience I felt I was a hypocrite, that I had failed in the commonest laws of life"— Her voice trailed off into silence, and Hester said no more. Then Enid as suddenly sat erect and drank her cup of tea thirstily. "I should like another, please," she said, "and then —this is such a good opportunity, I want to ask you about our plans—your plans."

Hester flushed a little as she poured out another cup of tea. Enid watched her. Then with a swift impulse she hid her own gleaming ring in a fold of her skirt, as if the sight of it hurt her.

Hester returned to the hearthrug, and just at that moment Jakes made his way to her side. She sat down and took him on her knee, hiding her face against his smooth head away from Enid's scrutiny.

"We think it will be best to— Anthony says mother and Drusilla must live at Netherlands with us, that there is room, and she can have everything.

She loves a garden, and there is a pleasant sitting-room with the window opening on the rose garden, and she can be wheeled out there in fine weather. The doctor is afraid—she will never be able to walk again."

A swift pang of jealousy, followed by an equally quick sense of shame, passed through Enid. She rose and walked a pace or two across the floor with a certain graceful impatience typical of her. "It is very good of Mr. Roden," she said, bringing herself up short before Hester; "but it is, of course, impossible."

A flood of colour rushed over Hester's face. "On the contrary," she said, with something of Enid's imperiousness, "the matter is settled; there is nothing else to be done. Listen"—as the other began to speak. "A short time before the fire took place I promised mother not to marry until our affairs were more settled. It was the one night that we seemed to get a little closer to each other. She was gentler; she even let me do one or two things for her; and then, of course, I did not really know that—that—Anthony cared." Hester's voice sank, and she smoothed Jakes' head as he lay on her knee. Enid looked at her with burning eyes and a glance that was almost antagonistic.

Hester suddenly took heart of grace and sat upright. "I refused to marry Anthony, and then

came the fire and the destruction of the only home we had. Both Anthony and Miss Octavia said it would be better to get married, and then she would have someone to rely on. He has been up to see her, and she seemed to understand. She smiled when he told her, and said, 'I am glad Hester will be happy; she is young, but I like your face'— Then she forgot again, and began to ramble about old times."

"Don't." Enid's voice held a jarring note. "It was about the pearls—always the pearls. She drives me mad when she speaks of them, counting them one by one, until my punishment seems more than even *I* deserve." She turned with a swift movement of appeal, holding out her hand to her sister. "Hester, don't you see that if she goes to you at Netherlands I am left out again—never to show her that I am sorry, that I'd give the next ten years of my life to undo these past ones of neglect? Let me—give her up to me now, little as I deserve it, and nothing shall be too hard, no hours too long. I will be good to her, not impatient. See!"—she took Hester's hand in her own with a clasp that was almost feverish in its strength, her eyes imploring. "There is a little house, quite a tiny one, off the road in a small garden, and when she can be moved I'll take her there; I've passed it in the motor. It is all settled now, isn't it?

There must be some money left; it would cost quite little, and I'll work hard, *so* hard. Say yes, Hester, though I don't deserve it. She will like it best."

Hester felt absolutely bewildered. "We must see. She is far happier with you, but"—

A knock came to the door, and Drusilla, a rigid, upright old figure, stepped into the room. "Miss Cynthia, you're wanted upstairs, please."

And Enid without another word followed her out of the room.

CHAPTER XXVII

MUFFINS AGAIN

As on a former occasion, John opened the door, and once again had he to admit that his mistress was away from home. Only gone that very morning for a "week-end," John said, with a specious air of sympathy which Roden admitted to himself was exceedingly well done. Pity the call had not taken place yesterday, John volunteered respectfully, as he took the visitor's coat and hat—a big "at home," with two long-haired gentlemen to sing and play the fiddle while everybody talked. Miss Clementina was alone, learning her lessons, if Mr. Roden would wait in the drawing-room. But Roden, mentally comparing his lot on the occasion of his previous visit, dismissed John at the school-room door with a wave of the hand which sent him away to the lower premises a much enriched man.

Roden felt in a lavish mood. John appeared in the light of an old friend now, and Roden was convinced that had the tidings been broken to

him his congratulations would have been of the warmest, and free from worldly seeking.

Roden paused on the mat to again take notes. This was the shabby old room where he and Hester had many a time made tea and aired their opinions, not in former days agreeing with the absolute unanimity of mind which in these happy later times characterised their intercourse.

The door stood a little way ajar; through the aperture came the monotonous murmur of a voice reciting that weight known to the initiated as avoirdupois. A thrill of recollection swept over the listener. "Sixteen drams one ounce, sixteen ounces one pound, thirteen pounds one st—" —

"It used to be fourteen when I went to school," remarked Roden, walking into the room.

Clementina, who had been lying on the rug learning by the light of the fire, sprang to her feet with incredulous joy. "Not *really*!" she exclaimed; "why, it can't be you! I suppose"—peering behind him to where the fire glow did not penetrate—"I suppose Hester isn't with you?"

"Now, *is* it likely?" protested Roden, allowing himself to be deposited by Clementina's long and excited arms into the only comfortable chair; "now, *is* it likely?"

Clementina sat on the rug again. "Well, no, I

suppose not," she said reluctantly; "but I thought after last time that you might, that perhaps"—

"Yes?"

Clementina tossed back her hair, as if to dismiss a foolish possibility. "Well, anyhow," she said, "have you seen her since?"

"I have."

"More than once?"

"More than once."

Clementina's bright gaze grew inquisitorial. "By accident?"

"On purpose." Roden spoke imperturbably, but his mouth was more compressed than before.

"H'm," said Clementina, and there was a pause. "I wish *I* could see her sometimes, by accident even." Clementina's voice quavered with a tinge of jealousy. "I suppose—but no, of course you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?"

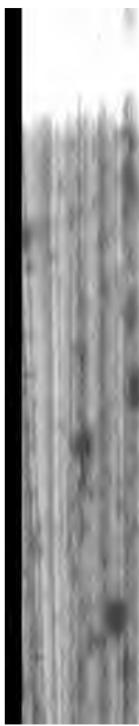
"Wouldn't give me her address?"

"But she said that time 'better not,'" remarked Roden, "and of course"—

Clementina nodded, and a brightness fell suddenly from her eyes and soaked into the one distinguishable pattern of the hearthrug. "Of course, you couldn't very well," she tried to subdue the trembling in her throat, "but if—if you meet her again, either by accident or on purpose, you'll ask her *very* hard



"There," she exclaimed, *"I thought you did."*



from me, won't you? You don't know how fond I am of Hester."

Roden put out his hand and took the speaker's comfortingly in his own. Clementina felt that later on shame for her tears might consume her, but now she was reckless of consequences.

"I *do* know," said Roden quietly, "because, you see, Clem, I love her very much myself."

Clementina sat erect; a little jet of coal-gas suddenly burst into flame and showed her tear-stained crimson cheeks. "There!" she exclaimed, "I *thought* you did. Somehow, I knew. And, ever since, I've made plans and plans in bed, all about you both."

She was breathless in her excitement. Then a sudden thought made her pause. "Does *she* know you do?"

Roden nodded.

"And does *she*?"—Clementina hesitated, wishing to garb the query gracefully—"does she like the idea?"

Roden with difficulty suppressed the smile which might at such a crucial moment have alienated Clementina's sympathies for ever. "She approves of it very highly."

Clementina gave a relieved sigh. "How glad I am," she said. "I thought she would, but one never knows; it must be so dreadful when she doesn't."

John's terribly fond of the housemaid across the street, and she's refused him over and over again."

Roden felt a sharp pang of sympathy for the slighted John, and wished that his tribute had been larger.

Clementina broke in upon his ruminations by giving his fingers a cordial squeeze. Her face, whence smiles had chased away the tears, was positively beaming. "I can't tell you how glad I am," she said, sitting down on the edge of the table near his chair. "Somehow I thought things that day—not that you'd ever have guessed I did."

"I had not the remotest idea," remarked Roden; "you disguised your feelings beautifully."

Clementina gave a relieved sigh. "One has to, of course," she said, "it would never do not to; and Hester did look so pretty and so dear, though her things were as shabby as anything."

"Were they?" asked Roden. "I did not think so, and you know clothes are not everything."

"No—o—o, but a good deal, don't you think? And, though Hester's sensible, and not fussy because she's shabby, she does like pretty frocks. She used to wear such nice ones."

There was a world of regret in Clementina's tones.

"And so she shall again," interposed Roden hastily; "the nicest to be had for money, if she likes."

"You mean *you'll* give them to her?" asked Clementina. "Are you pretty well off? You don't mind telling me, do you, because I'm anxious about Hester? She's been so poor lately. But I'm quite certain that she would like you just as well if you were poor. Hester's not a bit like some people."

"Not a bit," assented Roden. "Yes, we shall have plenty for bread and cheese and a few really unimpeachable frocks and hats."

Clementina looked puzzled, almost offended, then her face brightened. "Of course that means that you've heaps of money," she remarked delightedly, "and—and, isn't it a bit like a fairy tale? Though, of course, there aren't really such things as fairies."

Roden's thoughts went swiftly, not to Hester, but to that good and practical fairy, Miss Octavia. "Don't you lose your belief in fairies, Clem," he said. "Bless me, at twelve! What is the world coming to? Here am I over thirty, and believing in them more than ever I did."

"Not really?"

"Really and truly. There are ever so many in the world, Clem; only nowadays they are dressed like ordinary mortals, and not a bit pretty to look at perhaps. But their beautiful good-fairy souls are there, and you catch glimpses of them now and then when they think you are not noticing how kind they are and unselfish and thoughtful for others."

Clementina's face grew wistful. "I'd like to believe in them," she said. "I used to love them, but mother says it is ridiculous at my age to believe such nonsense, and so, of course, I've given it up with dolls and things. Do you suppose Hester believes in them?"

"Implicitly,"—Roden looked meditatively into the fire.—"she is staying with one now."

"You're only pretending, of course," said Clementina incredulously.

"I am not." Roden's face was so grave that Clementina drew closer. "She is the best, the kindest in the world, and I doubt very much if Hester and I would have been able to"— He paused.

Clementina nodded sagely. "I know — get married some time. I should so like to see your good fairy."

"She hopes to know you one day."

"Does she?" Clementina's cheeks grew rosy with gratification. "Did you tell her about me? Is she living near you? Near the house you once told me about? Your house?"

"Only a few minutes' walk away; that is why I can see Hester so often. You know, Clem, there are little fairies too, who don't know they are fairies, and whenever they do kind actions, such as"—Roden paused, and looked into the fire with steady eyes,

while Clementina gazed at him—"such as giving pairs of gloves when another person's are shabby, and doing it silently with a thought for sparing that other person's feelings. It seems to me that"—

Clementina winked away a sudden tear of gratification, and shook her head. "I'm glad," she said; "but, of course, a real fairy could have done it better, just with a wave of her wand, and at least a dozen pairs."

"Not better," Roden smiled a little and extended his hand, "because the real fairy might not have lost her pocket-money by giving the gloves, and the imitation fairy did."

"Only three weeks'," murmured Clementina; "and you see it was for Hester." Then she puckered up her forehead thoughtfully. "It's all so interesting," she remarked, with a sigh full of sentiment, "but there's a lot that's hard to understand. Mother's fond of Hester too, and that day —you know—when I told her Hester had sent her love if she'd care to have it, she was ever so glad to get it, and asked heaps of questions, and I heard her say to father, 'Such a good match for Hester—not, of course, that it's a bit likely, under the circumstances.' And father said, 'The man who marries little Hester will be a lucky chap.'"

Roden looked up suddenly, his eyes aglow with a light whose meaning Clementina could not fathom,

"And so he will; your father was right, Clementina, and so was your mother. It is a good match, a perfect match, with hopes and aims and thoughts in unison. And now let us be practical."

Clementina settled herself more comfortably in an angle of the hearth with her head against the wall. "Yes, let's," she remarked. "And first of all, tell me what Hester would like for a wedding present. I can go to"— She made a few rapid calculations, then more laboriously went over her monetary affairs. "Yes, if it isn't to be at once, I can go to three pounds, because my birthday comes in between. Now, what do you think she'd like?"

To please her, Roden pondered deeply. Then he gave up the problem. "There's heaps of time," he said, "and we'll think it over, Clem. It's not going to be yet, and only very, very quietly when it does happen—no bridesmaids."

Clementina remained silent for a moment, then she rallied. "I was afraid there wouldn't be," she said courageously, without a tremor in her voice to reveal how great the blow had been. "But she'll wear a white frock and—oh yes, of course—a wreath and veil?"

Roden shook his head. "Not a wreath even. Perhaps the frock may be white. We'll ask her to have a white one—nice and soft."

"And—and—aren't there going to be people invited?" Clementina was determined to know the very worst.

Roden felt sorry for her. He leaned over and took her hand, smoothing it between both his own. "You see, it's this way, Clem. Hester has had a great, great deal of trouble about family matters—never mind what—and her mother is seriously ill. Hester and I wish to have a very quiet wedding, though there is really nothing definitely settled. But if you would very much like to see Hester married, I think I might arrange for you to stay with Miss Octavia for a day or two."

"Please, *please*." Clementina's face was eloquent with appeal. "But who is Miss Octavia?"

"That is the mortal name of the elderly good fairy," said Roden.

And just then the schoolroom maid brought in tea. In the midst of the tray was a little round covered dish. "John thought you'd like a muffin, miss," said the maid, and as she left the room Clementina raised the cover.

"One each," she said. "Isn't it nice of John, without being asked, too!"

A flood of memories rushed over Roden as he gazed at John's prosaic but kindly offering. "I was thinking of the difference between now and the last muffin," he said, as Clementina with an inquiring

look handed him a cup of tea. "I mean to eat a whole one, Clementina, just to show how happy I am. And when you come to stay with Hester and me at Netherlands, we'll have muffins as often as you like, to the entire detriment of our complexions."

CHAPTER XXVIII

AN UNWRITTEN LETTER

DRESSED for walking, with Jakes impatient at her heels, Hester looked into Miss Octavia's sanctum. The mistress of the house was not there, but at the little writing-table in the window Enid was seated, pen in hand, a clean and unsullied sheet of note-paper before her. Hester surprised her in an unguarded moment, when the thoughts over which she held watch and ward had escaped from their owner's zealous keeping.

Hester felt a quick throb of sympathy as Enid turned her head away again. She knew the latter to be unhappy and conscience-stricken, but so resentful of pity that she dare not show a sign of anything approaching sympathy. She hesitated near the door. Enid frowned, dipped her pen into the ink, then took it out again with such haste that a large blot fell on the page before her.

"I'm so sorry I startled you," exclaimed Hester contritely. "I thought Miss Octavia was here; she wanted me to do something for her."

Enid carefully soaked up the ink with a pad of blotting-paper, though the sheet was irretrievably ruined. She gave her whole mind to it, not glancing a second time in Hester's direction. "She has gone into the village; she went through the gate about twenty minutes ago." Enid's voice was low, even dull, all the fresh, gay ring which formerly characterised it, and which made strangers turn instinctively to look at her when she spoke, had disappeared completely. Voices are tell-tale things, and Enid's told of wretchedness even more than her expression.

Hester hesitated, then half turned to go. There was no encouragement to stay, and but for a second glance at the other's face she would have left the room. "Why don't you come for a walk?" she asked, advancing a step nearer. "Do; it is really not very cold, and the roads are beautifully dry. You have never stirred outside the door since you came, and it's so bad for you."

Enid glanced out of the window, then bent to pat Jakes, who, as if to add his entreaties to Hester's, had placed his forepaws on her knee. "I simply *hate* walking"—her tone was petulant and ungracious. "Where are you going now?"

"For a walk first, to the station afterwards to meet Anthony, and then to have tea at Netherlands with him and Miss Octavia. He—he wants to show me some things, and to talk over"—

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She suddenly checked herself. Enid was looking at her with a world of misery in her eyes—a quick, passionate blending of jealousy, longing, and desire, which roused Hester to sudden wonder and sympathy. “Will you come?” she asked.

Enid shook her head with unmistakable decision. “No, thank you; I do not care to go, and besides”—with a short laugh that held more weariness than anger—“Drusilla will be looking me up soon to recall me to my duties. I only got away by saying that I had a very important letter to write, which ought to have gone at least three days ago.” She took the little ink-stained pad of blotting-paper as she spoke, and tore it to infinitesimal shreds over Miss Octavia’s carpet. “I did not tell her that it was the hardest I ever wrote in my life. If I had, she would probably have been glad.” She dropped her chin on her palm, and looked out at the brown, dried-up world outside the window.

“Why do you allow Drusilla to dictate to you?” Hester’s voice held an indignant ring.

Enid shrugged her shoulders indifferently. “Why? Because she has some right on her side, I suppose; she is only dealing out to me what she considers bare justice. It is so evident that she thinks my belated sense of duty a very uncertain quantity. Drusilla is a latter-day inquisitor.”

“She makes me very angry,” said Hester, ad-

vancing nearer to the writing-table. "Even long service does not excuse everything. But she has the best, the kindest, the most faithful heart in the world."

Enid nodded, and again shrugged her shoulders in the flippant way peculiar to her. "I know she is all you say, and more; so honest, so faithful, that she cannot forgive me. You see, Hester, it is often the best people in this world who are the hardest on transgressors, and that is why I dread—I know"—She took up the pen again as if reminded by her last words of the duty yet unfulfilled. Then, as Hester turned to go, she was arrested by an exclamation. Enid had risen to her feet, and with a swift movement had withdrawn behind the curtains. Someone was coming up the short drive. Enid turned quickly and clung to Hester's arm; her face was very white.

"What is the matter?" asked Hester. "Why, it is Mr. Ainsley!"

Enid's clasp tightened. "I shall have to tell him in words, instead of in writing. I shall have to face him. Why did I not write days ago? Hester, stay; don't go. I'm *afraid*. Yet you must"—

"Mr. Ainsley is in the drawing-room, miss," announced the maid at the door. "He asked to see Miss Drake."

Hester nodded, and the door closed again. Enid's face grew even paler.

"He knows something; they've sent him on from

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home. Could I see him in here? We shall be free from interruption, and Miss Octavia would not mind. Hester,"—she caught at her sister's arm imploringly,—"manage this for me; see that nobody comes while I am explaining. Think of the terrible, unforgivable *lie* I have to confess, and be sorry a little bit for me, though I don't deserve it."

For the first time Hester put her lips to the other's cheek. Her eyes were filled with tears, but Enid's were bright and hard with a kind of desperation. Hester went straight to the drawing-room. Ainsley turned quickly as she entered. Though he had evidently expected to see Enid, his face was very expressive and his tones cordial.

"Anthony has told me what a fortunate and happy man he is, Miss Percival; please accept my warmest congratulations. I am rejoiced the dear old fellow is going to be so happy at last." He spoke with a smile which told Hester that he knew nothing of Enid's altered circumstances.

"Anthony gave me your message," she said, a sudden wave of sympathy for his approaching trouble passing through her. "I feel very fortunate, and happier, perhaps, than I have any right to be, but"—her eyes were eloquent as they met his—"you know better than most people what he is."

"I do." Ainsley's voice was reminiscent of many things. "You know we have been fast friends

ever since we were little chaps at school together. I hope, now that his travels are over, we may meet oftener."

"I hope so too. And now you would like to see Miss Drake? She is waiting for you in another room. You will be more undisturbed there."

Ainsley's eager temperament was quick to imagine disaster. "She is quite well? There is nothing the matter?" he asked, as he followed Hester down the hall.

"Quite well." Hester pushed open the door as she spoke. "Enid, here is Mr. Ainsley." The next moment she was half-way up the staircase to warn Drusilla.

Ainsley closed the door and advanced eagerly towards the room's one occupant. Enid remained where she was, her hand pressed heavily against a tall chair-back. Ainsley in his haste to greet her covered the room in a stride, putting his arms around her.

"You might have come half-way," he said, in a voice which shook a little. "Oh, Enid, *when* will you realise"— He stopped abruptly.

Enid had turned her head away, and he felt her shrinking from his touch. His eager arms dropped suddenly to his side, and he tried to read her face. She was trembling as she stood, and some instinct told him it was no mere caprice this time that

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swayed her, but something deeper, nearer the stern realities of life. The sensation strengthened as she turned and looked at him for a moment. "You have not heard?"—the words came with a certain dull clearness—"they did not tell you?"

"They told me nothing but that I should find you here." Ainsley drew back a pace or two and leaned against the mantelshelf. It added to Enid's anguish of soul that even now he had not the faintest conception of what she had to tell. She knew that he doubted, as he had doubted before, the strength of her attachment, and had often dreaded the breaking of their engagement. She raised her hand to her throat, and his quick glance went to his ring upon her finger.

He took the hand in his own very gently, but with a determination against which she offered no opposition. "You have kept your word; it is still there, in the place where I put it," he said, with a throb in his voice which made her heart ache more acutely. "Enid *dearest*, don't tell me that you want me to take it off, that there is someone else! Yet," he dropped her hand again with a movement of despair, "yet anything would be better than this horrible uncertainty. Tell me why you look as you do. If"—he turned away as she said nothing and fingered the little ornaments on the chimney-piece, then once more faced her—"if you say there

is someone else—that your happiness depends—I will take it back."

With a swift movement Enid put her hand behind her away from sight. Her face was absolutely devoid of colour, but her eyes held an appeal which drew him towards her once again. She put out her right hand to keep him away. "No, no," she said, in a voice hardly raised above a whisper; "no, it is not that. There is no one but you, no other man in the whole wide world but you. And yet, before you go, you will ask me to take off your ring."

Ainsley's expression had lost its tenseness. He moved a step nearer and drew hand and ring from behind her back. "That is sheer nonsense," he said tenderly. "What has happened to trouble you like this? As if anything mattered now that I know. Why, in all the months of our engagement you never told me so much—made me so proud."

But she shook her head, and again he realised that some serious trouble surrounded her. "Come and tell me about it,"—he drew her towards the couch as he spoke; "sit down and tell me."

She obeyed, then looked up at him as he stood above her. She had never realised how she loved him until now, when the losing of him was so near. Through his thought and sympathy for her trouble shone the contentment roused by her avowal. To

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him, for the moment, nothing else mattered. It was enough to be near her, to realise how infinitely more dear she was than ever before. Enid looked at him for a long moment, then rose restlessly to her feet, finding it intolerable to read so clearly the thoughts passing through his mind, while he was absolutely oblivious to her own. "I wish you would look away while I tell you," she said, with an unexpected touch of her old petulance; "I—I could tell you more easily. It is so terribly hard to confess. I meant to write it all; the sheet of paper was there, ready"— His glance followed her outstretched hand.

His face grew suddenly grave. "Dear, don't speak as if you were afraid of me," he said. "What have I ever done that you should be"—

"Nothing." Enid paused before him. "It is because you have always been so—so—exactly what you are—kind and long-suffering and gentle with my moods—that it is so hard to tell you that ever since I've known you I've deceived you, Gilbert. No, no; please don't say a word." She stood on one side of the hearth and he faced her at the other, looking away from her into the fire so that he might make the avowal easier for her. "I am not the person you think me," she went on rapidly; "the name you know me by is not my own. I have for the last two years and more been masquerading

under false colours, acting a lie, deserting my own people deliberately when prosperity failed them. No, no ; let me tell you, let me make you realise how worthless I am, how weak, luxury-loving, unstable as water"— Her voice broke suddenly ; then, as he said nothing, she took up her tale hurriedly, as if determined to leave nothing unconfessed. "Perhaps you don't quite understand that I broke my mother's heart, and that—that she has not very long to live."

Ainsley raised his head. "Your mother is alive, then ? "

"She is upstairs. I am her elder daughter, and Hester is my sister. I am Cynthia Enid Percival."

Ainsley suddenly looked at her incredulously for a moment, then sat down on the couch, his head on his hands.

Enid gave a little cry, then checked herself. "Listen, and I'll tell you everything. It is best to get it over—better that you should know the very worst of me before—before you go. I was in Paris, at a finishing school where we had a great deal of liberty, and where we might visit friends and go about with them if they asked us. There were some very rich people named Drake, whom I knew through other friends, and they took a great fancy to me, gave me presents, and sometimes wished—

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as a joke, of course—that they could adopt me. One day I had a letter from my mother, telling me that we were ruined, that my father was hiding from justice, that we had lost everything—money, position—that we must work all the rest of our days to pay back what he had taken from other people. And—I could not face it. I failed her, and went the same day to the Drakes. You know them—the most generous souls alive—and they agreed, if my people would agree. And then I wrote home—you could never have loved me if you had seen the letter—and I changed my name to Enid Drake, for my mother never answered. And then you came into my life, and I suppose love—*real* love—makes one want to be better, more worthy. At all events, knowing you, loving you, altered me; and though my conscience had troubled me often and often before, I had managed to forget now and then. I meant to come back to them; I tried over and over again to tell you, and every time my courage failed. I was very near confession once, but something you said about never forgiving a deception made me realise all I should lose. And now at last, for the short time that is left, I mean to do my duty. It is all arranged; we are to have a little house not far from here, and I shall be with her altogether."

The room grew very silent. There was not a stir from the surroundings. The short day was drawing

to a close, and a glow from the sunset sky touched the brown outer world into a sudden glory of gold and crimson. Every russet twig outside the window took on a gilded edge, and a shaft of light struck across Enid's eyes. She closed them for a moment. Ainsley had risen, and was standing in the darker corner of the hearth. Enid turned, and drew a little nearer, putting out her hand. The opals gleamed dimly. Ainsley still said nothing. Enid stood motionless, speaking in a low tone, hardly above a whisper. "I promised—but it does not matter now—to wait till you told me to take it off. I am sorry to have brought unhappiness into your life."

Ainsley put out his hand with a swift gesture and drew her nearer. She realised something about him that she had never seen before. "I have not asked you to take it off," he said slowly; "and a promise *is* a promise. If I ask you to keep it there, Enid, will you? I realise to-day what I never knew before. I believe that in spite of all we stand more chance of happiness than ever we did with that secret between us. It was always there, wasn't it, with its vague shadow? I won't ask you to give up one moment to me that ought to be spent with your mother, but if I choose to wait, however long or short the time, you will wear the ring because I ask it, to be a link between us until you can come to me?"

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Enid clung to him speechlessly for a moment. Then she put the ring to her lips. "I don't deserve such happiness," she whispered brokenly; "and I thought that so soon it would be gone from me for ever."

CHAPTER XXIX

AT THE GATE

"*Hawthorne agrees with most of us.*"—Miss Octavia paused at the summit of the hill to regain her breath; "it is resuscitating morally as well as physically."

She looked at Hester, and Hester glanced back at her, but the eyes of both went to the woods of Hawthorne's original home of influence, but possessing now an ~~un~~ ^{un}utterable beauty under the softening, shade cast out by distance and atmosphere.

"Are we thinking of End?" queried Hester.

"I have not another nearer home."

Miss Octavia glanced at the face beside her, where ~~happiness~~ ^{was} still a continual guest, and contentment ~~had~~ ^{had} visited the curves in their former beauty. ~~happiness~~ agreed with Hester, and had developed to a very rare and happiness after adversity can. ~~never~~ ^{never} ~~had~~ ^{had} visited ~~her~~ ^{her} self, glad to think that the loss of those she cared for most ~~had~~ ^{had} fallen at ~~her~~ ^{her} own ~~hands~~ ^{hands}.

"Life is really changed," said Hester, ~~thinking~~ ^{thinking} ~~about~~ ^{about} the house; it's

small, of course, but she spares Drusilla in every way she can, and Drusilla quite believes in her now. When I went in yesterday, Enid was making the beds, with a big apron tied round her, and in the pocket of it a thick letter. It tumbled out, and I saw that it was addressed by Gilbert Ainsley. Enid looks another being when she even speaks of him. And she has told me how very, *very* nearly all was over between them. The Drakes came before I left. How nice they are—they can't do enough for mother, loading her with flowers and fruit. She likes them both so much, too, and they seem literally to adore Enid."

"Enid is immensely improved"—Miss Octavia was even then on her way to the little house where Enid, Mrs. Percival, and Drusilla lived together—"and Mr. Ainsley is not so much to be pitied as formerly. She has lost all those freakish ways, and she is infinitely tender and patient with your mother, Hester; it is quite delightful to see them together."

"Mother still forgets," said Hester, "and it can't be wrong to hope that she always will. She is so gentle now, and so easily pleased with trifles." She suddenly turned and put her arm through Miss Octavia's. "If they have no room for me at the ~~little~~ cottage, why should I mind?" she asked, and her eyes held no trace of envy. "Could I be

happier than with you? It is the first real home I have had for years. Who is it that said, 'Home is not where we live, but where we love'? How true it is. You and Anthony have taught me that between you."

"And have I benefited not at all?" Miss Octavia's kind eyes were dim. "My dear, I was a very lonely old woman, in spite of many interests, until you and Anthony came into my life. Work, reading, flowers, the poor, the ailing, are all absorbing enough in their way, but they become even beautiful when accompanied by the home life and the companionship of those dear to us. Under those circumstances it is so easy to realise that the kingdom of God *is* within us. We have much for which to be thankful. I see Anthony coming in the distance; now do let us be sensible. Bless me, child, quick! where is my handkerchief? Thank you. Tell Anthony I expect him to lunch, *as usual*." And with an agility surprising in one who designated herself an old woman, Miss Octavia beat a retreat across the stile where not so long ago she and Hester had become acquainted.

Roden looked after her retreating figure, then stooped to respond to Jakes' advances.

"You are to come to lunch *as usual*, were Aunt Octavia's parting words," said Hester, as they walked along the lane.

"I was on my way," said Roden imperturbably; "she knows quite well how unnecessary the invitation is. What should we do without her, Hester?" His keen eyes followed Miss Octavia down the length of a field, when she disappeared from sight, then he paused, folded his arms on the rail, and looked at Hester with a glance which said very plainly that she was the delight of his eyes. "I have a special predilection for this gate," he remarked presently.

"There are so many five-barred gates," replied Hester. "I wonder why?" She spoke dreamily rather than with a desire for knowledge. Her hand in Anthony's, she was at peace with the world.

"It was here I stood that night we met again." Roden's tone was reminiscent of many things. "You can have no idea how absolutely alone in the world I felt until I heard your voice, and knew my quest had ended before it had begun."

Hester rubbed her cheek softly against his coat sleeve. "How wonderful it has all been," she said, in a low tone. "One talks of fate. I did that night, Anthony, but now"— She broke off and looked up at him, her eyes wide with feeling. "There is really no such thing, is there? It is something higher and better."

Roden glanced down at the face so near his shoulder. His own grew grave. "Yes," he said

slowly, "I quite believe we owe our happiness to something better—not to fate, but to Providence."

Hester drew a little nearer. She knew that even to her the admission came with difficulty. Like many another Englishman of deep convictions, Roden found an utter impossibility in speaking of them, even to his nearest and dearest. His arm was round her closely now. Hester stood suddenly on tiptoe. "Bend your head just an inch," she whispered softly. "There, my dear, my own; I know so well what you felt, for I've been lonely too." She put gentle fingers to his throat, still half shy in showing her love for him. "But now we have one another."

The unexpected caress, half quaint, half motherly as it was, and wholly tender, came to Roden as a revelation of what the world can hold when love illumines it with the light that never was on land or sea. He said not a syllable as they stood together wrapped in a happiness so deep, so intense, that words failed them both.

It was Jakes, panting and triumphant after a foray across the field, who roused them. Hester brought her eyes back from the blue distance of the hills.

"Let's try to do some good in the world, Anthony, when—when"—

Roden shook himself free from the silence which still encircled him. "Yes," he remarked, "we will,

as soon as you like." Then his glance too came back from the far-away and grew alert. "Put your foot on the second bar of the gate," he said quickly; "I want you to look into the hollow. Not high enough? The third, then; I'll hold you. Now what do you see?"

Hester's eyes were puzzled, but she fell in with his humour. "A clump of trees quite bare now, a scrap of the village green, some of the children running out of school; yes, see, the door is open, and there's the schoolmaster."

"Nothing more?" Roden's tone was so insistent that Hester glanced round at him, and then turned again to view the scenery in the hollow beneath. "You've forgotten the most important thing there. How very dull you are. What else do you see? Suppose you had to describe it to someone who couldn't see at all."

"There's a rook flying home to the nest, and a tiny peep of the church tower," Hester resumed, anxious to please him.

"And as a natural consequence of the tower, the church, I presume?" Roden's tones were preternaturally severe.

Hester turned a puzzled glance again in his direction. "The church, of course, is there," she agreed.

"Well, what is a church for?"

"To go to service in, I suppose."

"And what else, pray? Don't people ever get married there, for instance?"

Hester coloured radiantly, and then turned her head away. "Occasionally, I suppose," she said, in a low tone, with only the pink tip of an ear in view.

"It is a dear little church," said Roden, his face growing grave again. "On the wall just opposite the Netherlands pew, where I sit, is a tablet to my mother, Hester."

Hester nodded. "I know," she said; "I've read it."

"But I have never seen you in church since I came to Netherlands."

Hester descended from her height and stood beside him. She coloured a little, and then grew pale. "I sat in your pew one day and read the 'In Memoriam' words to your mother. They are so beautiful that I cried a little. But it was not on Sunday; the woman was cleaning the church. I never went to service there, but always to the minster. You see," she hesitated, "we were *in* the village, but not *of* it, and I preferred to go where no one knew me."

"So that accounts for it," exclaimed Roden. "I wondered, I hoped and looked for you, when all the time your little feet were trudging a weary four miles to the minster, poor little girl! And I never

to dream that you had been in my place there! Instinct ought to have told me. But you won't mind the church with me, Hester? I'm the squire, you know, and take round the bag on Sunday morning; and, of course, when you marry me you'll be the squire's lady." He pinched her averted ear very tenderly.

"How imposing," said Hester, with a laugh that ended unsteadily. "No, I shall not mind going there with you; I shall love it."

"Let us be married there one day before long," Roden's tone was eager as a boy's, "without any fuss, just quietly to ourselves, with Aunt Octavia to look on and give us her blessing, and speed us on our way through the world. What more could we want, Hester? You don't care about such things—bridesmaids and crowds, and all that—though, of course, women do, I suppose?"

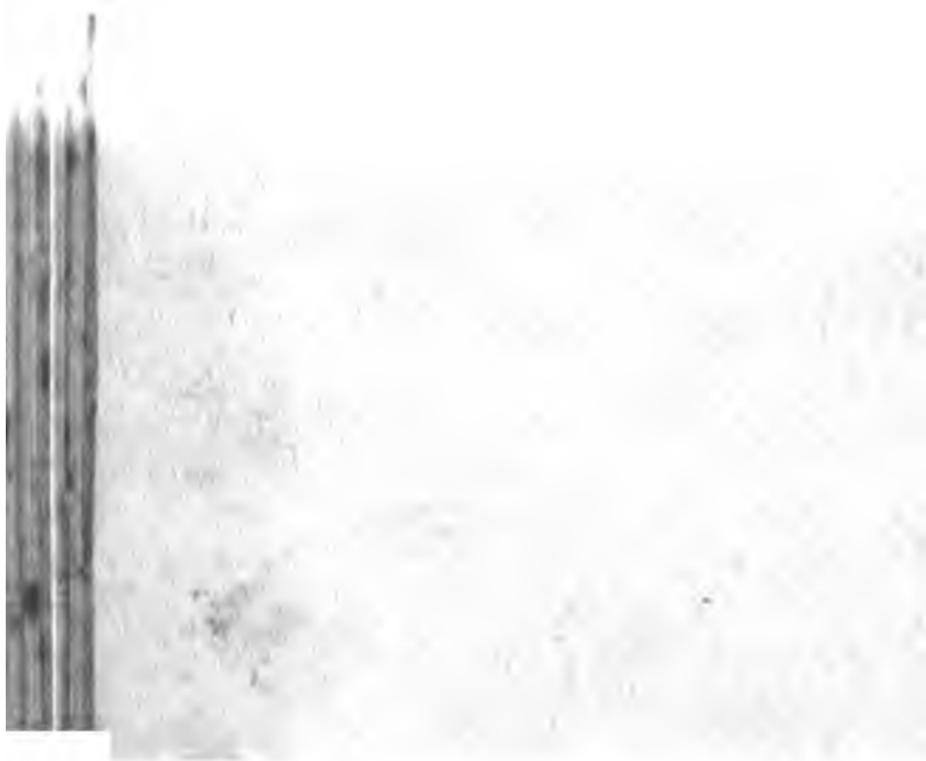
Hester shook her head. Her eyes were clear, half shy, half introspective. "In any case I should have hated them," she said; "and you know, Anthony, you see"—she turned her head away and glanced across the woods of Netherlands, her future home—"as the case now stands"— She broke off suddenly when she met his glance; for, comprehending her meaning, his face had lost its eagerness and had become grave, almost stern.

"I know what is in your thoughts," he said, "and

I want you, Hester, once and for always, to dismiss it. As the case now stands, from being the most lonely man conceivable, I am the happiest. All I have, all I do, all I hope for is centred in you. You have given me pride of home, joy in life, have opened up to me all the innumerable wonders that follow in the train of such love as we have for one another. That is how the case stands, thank God, and it could not well stand better. Do you agree?"

And silently, with a thankful heart, Hester agreed.





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